



**Žižek  
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**Reading  
Hegel**

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# Reading Hegel

Slavoj Žižek, Frank Ruda, and Agon Hamza

polity

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## ***Notes on the text***

The first chapter, *Hegel: The Spirit of Distrust*, was written by Slavoj Žižek; the second chapter, *Hegel on the Rocks: Remarks on the Concept of Nature*, by Frank Ruda; and the third, *The Future of the Absolute*, by Agon Hamza. The introduction is coauthored.

## ***Introduction***

According to Marx's famous saying, "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."<sup>1</sup>

Displacing this well-known quip, if only a bit, we might ask: Does this also hold for world-historic personages and facts in and of philosophy? Could one read Hegel's philosophy itself as the first, the tragic event? Such a reading would in some respects not be entirely alien to a certain phase in the reception of Hegel's thought in general. Many of his readers have asserted that he can and must be considered an essentially tragic thinker – one may here just in passing refer to the famous "tragedy in ethical life" which is often taken to provide a paradigmatic articulation not only of the constitution of the Greek, but also of modern political life and ethical communities, despite this view being repeatedly contested. However, if – for the sake of following this hypothesis – Hegel represents the tragic event, not only of ethical life, but also of modern philosophy in general, where and how do we locate its repetition in the form of the farce? Where are we to find Hegel's inverted twin?

There is certainly a farcical dimension to the immediate aftermath of Hegel's thought. This is already the case, because (some of) his pupils prepared and published an edition of his works that became highly influential to most of his subsequent readers, and which consequently led, to some degree, to profound confusion about the true kernel and thrust of Hegel's philosophical system, and – by adding comments and annotations that were taken to be his very own wording – generated a peculiar struggle about Hegel's ultimate achievements (and failures). Surprisingly material from this edition was nonetheless able to become, for long, the main reference for reading Hegel – a sort of manifestation of the *Deckerinnerung*, the screen memory that overshadows what one perceives to be Hegel's ultimate philosophical system.<sup>2</sup> However, the immediate Hegelian aftermath also already inaugurated, among other

things, the infamous split between the young and the old Hegelians, which seemed to practically and farcically enact Hegel's own claim that any immediate unity (and thus also that of the Hegelianism and of Hegel himself) will need to undergo processes of alienation and division to, at least possibly, reinstate the original unity in a reflected form. Does Hegel's ultimate tragedy, in both senses of the term, lie in the fact that immediately after his death his philosophy was not only dissected and rebutted, but there was also a farcical element in the defense of a Hegel that was articulated in words he never wrote against critics who got it all wrong? So, did the farce not simply prove the tragedy to be a real tragedy? One could also, in both enlarging the historical focus and in locating the ultimate embodiment of the repetition of Hegel's tragedy as farce, identify the tragedy of Hegel's oeuvre with the fact that the arguably most influential and important pupil of the thinker who was by many perceived to have been a Prussian state philosopher (Hegel), has been one of the most influential and famous contenders of revolution and of overthrowing the state, namely Marx. May then not Marx's ultimate Hegelian heritage – again confirming the tragedy–farce sequence – be identified in the fact that he himself not only witnessed as many rebuttals as Hegel, but was actually often claimed to have been the one who put (revolutionary) dialectic into practice, and thereby refuted it even more harshly, due to the brutal and bloody outcomes of his thought when concretely realized?

The move from tragedy to farce then happens first as tragedy, then as farce that becomes again, a tragedy of its own, and then repeats as a (bloody) farce ... Whatever historical frame one likes to posit, today neither Marx nor Hegel are, and maybe surprisingly, thinkers who are generally and overall considered to be indefensible any more. Both have become widely accepted (rather than merely tolerated) within the universities and even within the wider outskirts of academia. There are journals dedicated to both, conferences held around the world on a regular basis that deepen and perpetuate the already existing immense scholarship. Numerous books are regularly published on their work and editions of their writings that demonstrate high philological quality have been prepared during recent years. They have almost created



their own branches of the academic industry and have certainly become proper objects of academic study. At first sight, it might seem surprising that this holds for both Hegel and Marx. It might seem – given the political history linked to their names – especially astounding that this also happened to Marx. And one might be tempted to assume that he was after all too farcical (in all the brutal aspects of the farce) to be integrated into and assimilated within academic discourse, even if simply because it is mainly the discourse of state institutions (one of the reasons why Lacan called it “discourse of the university”). Was Marx not the anti-statist thinker *par excellence* and Hegel the ultimate thinker of the (Prussian) state?

One ought not to forget and thus must acknowledge that already in the last century there have been more institutions devoted to the study of Marx (and Engels) and of historical and dialectical materialism than there have ever been for (the arch idealist) Hegel. Surprising as it may be, it has proven for very different reasons more difficult to assimilate and integrate Hegel into academia, and this is the case, even though he was deemed to have been a state philosopher in all senses of the term (and Marx did not manage to find a proper job in any institution) and not at all the paradigmatic thinker of revolution. There seemed (and maybe still seems) to be something in Hegel’s thought that was nonetheless a too bitter pill, too hard, too big to swallow, too much to assimilate for, at least, academia. Maybe it is just too difficult to swallow a system that swallows everything – as he was often criticized for having. A symptom of this may be, as everyone knows, that Hegel was for a long time – and especially in the last century – considered to be the incarnation of the worst kind of philosophy possible. This was, at least partially, because he was one of the very few thinkers who one could find within the history of philosophy who did not announce and inaugurate a renewal of philosophical thought. He was radical in claiming that he brought to the end what had begun long before him. Hegel was thus considered the worst, since he was considered a thinker not allowing for, not conceiving of novelty or transformation. This was paradoxically but symptomatically identified to manifest in him declaring the end of philosophy (in his own philosophy); but he also

declared the end of art, politics, religion, history, and thus all human practices. All this was read as if the end would not change anything. Hegel was the worst philosophy could get, because he ended (and as he phrased it himself: completed) it. He sublated, however precisely this term is to be understood, everything into a final form of knowledge that – worse comes to worst – he seems to have called Absolute Knowing.

Thereby he was for a long time taken to be the thinker who forestalled any kind of future, in and of philosophy or in and of history, because he systematically suspended historicity proper. This is a criticism that was famously articulated repeatedly by many, mostly by Marxist critics of Hegel. Hegel was considered, after Plato maybe (and a slightly naive Frenchman who inaugurated modern philosophy), philosophy's ultimate *bête noir*. He was the one who just seemed to have overdone it: at once the tragedy and the farce of philosophy, one permanently flipping over into the other, like a circle of circles. That Hegel pathologically, and to a certain degree comically, exaggerated the very business of philosophy was already diagnosed by a famous pupil of Sigmund Freud, namely Carl Gustav Jung, who stated that Hegel's language is so megalomaniac that it is reminiscent of the language of schizophrenics. If one takes Jung's diagnosis more seriously than one should – since it seems apparent that Jung did not know anything about and of Hegel – this rather uninformed diagnosis might provide a starting point for understanding why today there is a peculiar, maybe even schizophrenic kind of resuscitation of Hegel's thought. Hegel is today no longer represented as philosophy's ultimate lowland but as its pragmatist summit, he is no longer taken to be the thinker who pushed rationalism and systematicity so far that it went over its rationalist edge, he is rather taken to be the first to establish a proper and moderate account of the rational components of collective human practice, with all its rational weaknesses and strengths; he is no longer the philosopher of the end of all practices and of ultimate sublation, but rather a philosopher of intersubjectively mediated normativity that as such has – at least for human beings – neither end nor beginning, because it is the ultimate form of human practice. Yet, have these shifts of emphasis just been missed beforehand or do they come at a price?

How does one also integrate and not simply discard everything that in Hegel's oeuvre seems to disturb and spoil this rather peaceful and tamed picture of his philosophy?

Can this become the goal of a contemporary rendering of Hegel? Today, many aspects of his thought, be it surprising passages in the philosophy of right or the theory of madness in his philosophy of subjective spirit, or most directly from his concept of Absolute Knowing that is still often – even though no longer always – identified as the highpoint of his metaphysical regression, are still difficult to tackle for Hegel's readers. To avoid those difficulties, the name "Hegel" seems to have become precisely the kind of toolbox that, as Michel Foucault once stated, one should take all kinds of theory to be and out of which one takes what one needs and what appears to be useful here and now. Is contemporary Hegelianism methodologically Foucauldian? Might this even be ultimately a good thing, or maybe the best one can do with Hegel today? This raises at least a number of questions: Firstly, what does it mean that one is witnessing today not only a Hegel revival but one that risks getting rid of all the elements that were considered crucial elements of the "substance" of Hegelian thought that made it once appear too dangerous, crazy, or just tragically metaphysical? And what is a Hegel without its "metaphysical," "megalomaniac" kernel, wherever precisely we may locate it? Is this akin to the infamous beer without alcohol?

But the main question is the following one: what would Hegel – and not the name, "Hegel" – have said vis-à-vis this new wave of reception of his thought? What are we in the eyes of Hegel (and not the other way around)? Hegel always insisted that philosophy only must think what is (and not what should be). But what is, is (what constitutes) one's "time." And this is why philosophy has the difficult task of grasping its own time in thought (according to Hegel's most famous definition of philosophy). But what does one do with a philosophy that asserts that the task of philosophy is to think its own time, after it exhausted and exceeded this very time? How does one think the present time with Hegel (a time after Hegel's time that has also become the present of new Hegelianism)? Resulting from this, the thrust of the book you're

about to read can be best formulated in the following question: What does it mean to conceive of our time, “the today,” as a Hegelian? In the preface of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes:

... it is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era. Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labour of its own transformation. Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward. But just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long, quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth – there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born – so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms. The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change. The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world.<sup>3</sup>

Hegel’s sunburst was the French Revolution, whose ardent supporter he was. In our predicament, we are still unable to fully grasp and comprehend the world in which we are, because inter alia we still were unable to solve the problems brought about by the French Revolution (how to properly bring together freedom and equality, for instance). We throw catchwords around, veiled as concepts, through which we try to understand the epoch into which we are entering globally. This grandiose rhetoric only comes to hide the lack of conceptual and philosophical (or theoretical) apparatus, capable of truly understanding our own era. Its dawn appears to be, doubtlessly, a violent one, which thereby produces unsettling effects to established theories and destroys the already existing structures. It is our view that the present epoch can be best and fully grasped through the Hegelian system: “the whole mass of ideas and concepts” that are being proposed either as an anti-thesis of Hegel, or as a “subtle” replacement, are collapsing in front

of the reality they try to understand and explain. In 1922 Lenin proposed the creation of a *Society of the Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics*. The present book attempts in a different form to repeat this proposal. It is not only conceived as (yet another) exercise in affirming the unique dimension of Hegel's philosophical system. We are also trying to emphasize in the following the necessity of drawing lines of demarcation within this very society, creating instructive liaisons and debating (between friends) what paths remain still open to explore and which might be the ones that are leading us astray. Our hope that the practice of such a Hegel-friendly society would not only prove to be farcical or tragic, but may bring to light a properly comic dimension of Hegel – a dimension that has been often neglected or at least downplayed in Hegelian scholarship but has been brought to the fore by some in recent years.<sup>4</sup> The present book therefore presents three contributions from imagined members of this still fictitious society, three contributions within which becomes manifest the results of a continuous collective labor and discussions between three friends, who also happen to be friends of Hegelian dialectics.

*Reading Hegel* has been completed about three years after *Reading Marx* – the first book on which the three of us worked together. This move (from Marx to Hegel) is not accidental. It is our firm conviction that our contemporary predicament calls for a return from Marx to Hegel (that we also noted in our previous book). This return does not consist only of the “materialist reversal” of Marx (a thesis elaborated and developed in length by Žižek), but its implications and consequences are much deeper (for example the development and affirmation of an idealism of another kind, an idealism without idealism). So, why return (from Marx) to Hegel?

Hegel was born about a quarter of a millennium ago. Then, as the famous Heideggerian adage goes, he thought and then he finally died. One hundred and twenty-five years after his death, Theodor W. Adorno remarked that historical anniversaries of births or deaths create a peculiar temptation for those who had “the dubious good fortune”<sup>5</sup> to have been born and thus to live later. It is tempting to believe that they

thereby are in the role of the sovereign judges of the past, capable of evaluating everything that and everyone who came before. But standing on a higher pile of dead predecessors and thinkers does not (automatically) generate the capacity to decide the fate of the past and certainly it is an insufficient ground to judge a past thinker. A historical anniversary seduces us into seeing ourselves as subjects supposed to know – what today still has contemporary significance and what does not. They are therefore occasions on which we can learn something about the spontaneous ideology that is inscribed into our immediate relationship to historical time, and especially to the past. Adorno makes a plea for resisting the gesture of arrogantly discriminating between *What is Living and What is Dead* – for example – *of the Philosophy of Hegel*.<sup>6</sup> Adorno viciously remarked that “the converse question is not even raised,” namely “what the present means in the face of Hegel.”<sup>7</sup> The distinction between what is alive and dead, especially in the realm of thinking, should never be blindly trusted to be administered only by those alive right now. Being alive does not make one automatically into a good judge of what is living and not even of what it is to be alive.

The dialectical intricacy to which Adorno is pointing does have a direct relation to a difficulty that Hegel himself pointed out at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: any “right now” comes with its inner dialectic that one can reformulate like this: as soon as we try to capture what we mean when we say “now,” now is not “now” any more. What seemed so evident and undoubtedly true and certain at first sight – now – proves to be essentially not what we expected it to be. That one therefore must question the assumption of stable distinctions (for example between life and death, as one assumes conceiving of them in natural and biological terms alone, or between the past as what happened before and the present as what is here right now) in general. This is one way of reformulating one fundamental law of the Hegelian dialectic, namely that “one divides into two,” as it was once rendered much later. Such formal(ized) and therefore abstract renderings of what we refer to as Hegel’s or the Hegelian “dialectic” then certainly and immediately also apply to their own product: “one divides into two” applies to each one produced by the first splitting of the one. The

two sides that result from the originary division destabilize repeatedly, and everything that appears solid, from this perspective, melts into air. But this also means that things can revert from one to the other: there can be something undying in the thought of the dead – which can, but mustn't be good – as well as something deadening in what seems most lively (including life itself or vitalism). As Brecht once remarked vis-à-vis Hegel's dialectic (as presented in his *Science of Logic*): two concepts – very much as the two sides mentioned above – are separate, yet welded together: “they fight each other ... and enter ... into pairs, each is married to its opposite ... They can live neither with nor without each other.”<sup>8</sup> This is the “*dialectic which*” each side “*possesses within itself*” – it is what “moves the subject forward” [*der Gang der Sache selbst*], “the going or passing of the thing itself.”<sup>9</sup>

If in dialectical spirit, one inverts the spontaneous(ly tempting) perspective on Hegel and starts looking at our present, including at its past (thus even at Hegel) as well as our present's (conception of the) future with Hegelian eyes – Hegel thereby becoming “*die Sache selbst*,” – one necessarily transforms one's gaze. One looks in a circle (of circles) and might potentially end up forming a Borromean knot, or even a Klein bottle,<sup>10</sup> both images that Hegel did not know, but could have liked. The latter always argued that philosophy deals not with “what is dead, buried and corrupt,” but with the “living present.”<sup>11</sup> To look at Hegel's thought with eyes trained to see in this way, means to look at what his philosophy allows us to see in today's world and proves Hegel's dialectical contemporaneity. Hegel is with us – as the “absolute is with us ... all along”<sup>12</sup> – in what his thought allows us to see in and of the present. What can it make us see? This is what we seek to find out in the following by reading Hegel. By reading Hegel as a reader of our contemporary situation; by reading Hegel as a reader of the readers of Hegel; and by reading Hegel as a thinker whose thought is equipped to intervene into the most burning questions not only of contemporary philosophy, but of contemporary socio-collective practice. Hegel assigned to art, for example, the capacity to make visible such invisible structures. In 1826 he remarks that the “semblance [*Schein*] of art is a



much higher and truer form of the real than that which we are used to call reality.” This means that art allows us to see what makes reality tick, the dividing dialectical motors that determine it, “the powers at work in it.”<sup>13</sup> Philosophy, for Hegel, has the same content as art has, but it presents it in a different form. It is this presentation that we will explore in the following.

This will happen in three instalments: Slavoj Žižek will defend the thesis that Hegel is the philosopher most open to the future precisely because he explicitly prohibits any project of how our future should look. This becomes manifest in the Preface to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, with the Owl of Minerva, which takes off at dusk. Philosophy can only paint “gray on gray,” i.e., it only translates into a “gray” (lifeless) conceptual scheme, a form of life that has already reached its peak and entered its decline (is becoming “gray” itself). From this we can infer that we should reject all those readings of Hegel that see in his thought an implicit model of a future society reconciled with itself, leaving behind the alienations of modernity – Žižek calls them the “not-yet-Hegelians.” In this regard, the first chapter engages systematically with Robert Brandom’s masterpiece *The Spirit of Trust*, i.e. the position one of the most prominent “not-yet-there Hegelians.” And it demonstrates in what way Hegel has already moved beyond any such form of transcendental pragmatism.

Frank Ruda’s contribution examines the Hegelian concept of nature against the background of two features specific to the present philosophical conjuncture:

1. The widespread contemporary tendency to present naturalizing readings of Hegel and
2. The equally widespread return of philosophies of nature to the contemporary philosophical scene. The chapter shows by drawing on a variety of different (anecdotal, systematic, didactical, and biographical) material why it is precisely Hegel’s concept of nature that forces us to avoid all types of naturalization.



Agon Hamza in the third and the final chapter takes up the problem of Hegel's materialism. It begins with the claim that it is not Hegel who requires a materialist reversal but Marx. It develops a Hegelian critique of Marx. It formulates a discussion of the (ir)religious criticism in Marx and Hegel's readings of Christianity. The problem of the state remains one of the most important topics in the contemporary debates of the Left. Clearly, Marx and Marxism in general failed to outline a theory of the state different from that of capitalist form. The contemporary Left, predominantly, wants to do away with the state *tout court*, but without having a general idea of how to organize the society in its basic levels, even when faced with the serious challenges that call for universal cooperation. Therefore, the return to Hegel's theory of the state offers us the possibility of conceptualizing a vision of a "non-statal state" as a political possibility.

What is a Hegelian account of a present that has ultimately become (somewhat) Hegelian (in philosophy)? We are well aware that this book does not exhaust or fulfill its self-set task, yet we assume that the three chapters can nonetheless stand – in very Hegelian fashion, almost as a concrete universality – to produce an insight into Hegel's universality and contemporaneity, so that it becomes visible that Hegel has been with us all along. If this attempt generates further critical and harsh discussions among the friends of Hegel, this work will have served this end even more successfully. The aim of the present book is neither simply to assert the relevance of Hegel's thought, nor only to explore the ways in which one can and maybe should be a Hegelian today, but also to depict why it is precisely Hegel who provides a major point of orientation and conceptual tools for understanding the present world as it is.

You will find in the following three attempts to avoid the arrogant position that we deem Adorno rightly criticized. But what does this mean? For us, it means you will get three attempts to treat Hegel as our contemporary, and with whom we attempt to look at the present, since we believe that his theoretical eyes can help us see what otherwise remains invisible, in the present as well as to the naked eye. Be

prepared, you will get three attempts to look with Hegelian eyes through Hegelian glasses.

Berlin/Ljubljana/Prishtina, April 2021

## Notes

1. Karl Marx, *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>.
2. This is what Žižek has repeatedly argued to be true for the immediate Hegelian aftermath from Kierkegaard through Schopenhauer, Marx, and even Schelling.
3. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 6–7.
4. Cf. Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), or Mladen Dolar, “The Comic Mimesis,” *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 570–589.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. xxi.
6. Benedetto Croce, *What is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel?* (London: Kessinger Publishing, 2008).
7. Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993) p. xxi.
8. Cf. Bertolt Brecht, “On Hegelian Dialectic,” Autodidact Project:  
<http://www.autodidactproject.org/other/hegel-brecht.html>.
9. G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), p. 54
10. On this, cf. for example: Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

- [11.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy to Plato* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska University Press), p. 38.
- [12.](#) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 47.
- [13.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst. Vorlesung von 1826* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), p. 64.

# 1

## ***Hegel: The Spirit of Distrust***

### **Hegel in a Topsy-Turvy World**

The most famous and endlessly quoted opening of a novel is that of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy for every epoch of fast historical change to recognize itself in this description, and this holds also for our present period, which is the best of times (think just about the explosion of scientific and technological discoveries) and the worst of times (pandemic, global warming, social protests ...), the epoch of (fundamentalist) belief and of growing incredulity, of despair (that we are approaching some apocalypse), and of hope (that science or social protests will save us and give birth to a better world). Already, in his first book manuscript *System der Sittlichkeit* (1802–1803), Hegel pointed out that such a period is the time for philosophy: not simply a period of catastrophes but a period in which the best and the worst, hope and despair, are inextricably mixed – the Old order (which retroactively appears “organic”) is disintegrating, and the New, into which we invested all our hopes, generates its own catastrophic prospects. In such a period, we have to think again the very presuppositions of our social existence. Plato's thought was a reaction to the crisis of the Athenian *polis*, Hegel's

thought was a reaction to the complex situation after the French Revolution, and today – today we live the antagonisms of global capitalism, which, a quarter of a century ago, appeared as the end of history.

What should philosophy do in such a time? Let's make a step back and turn to our everyday understanding of what philosophy means, which is best exemplified by the following incident:

A judge has ruled that ethical veganism qualifies as a philosophical belief protected under UK law. In a short summary judgment, /the judge/ Postle declared that veganism “clearly in my view meets all the criteria; it is a philosophical belief, not just an opinion.” “It is cogent, serious and important, and worthy of respect in democratic society,” he added.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, those who resist the tough measures to control the pandemic are also philosophers, and this statement is not to be taken in an ironic or mocking way: for them, measures like wearing masks and social distancing are in conflict with their most elementary understanding of human freedom and dignity – philosophy originates as the hermeneutics of our daily lives, it brings out its implicit presuppositions and “prejudices.” What Hegel does is to conceive philosophy as “its own time apprehended in thoughts” and, consequently, to bring out the mad dance of passages from one to another philosophy and conflicts between them, which are simultaneously conflicts between actual life forms. Hegel doesn't judge different philosophies from some standard of truth presupposed in advance – all he tries to do is to describe the immanent logic of this mad dance.

We all know Polonius' comment on Hamlet's words: “Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.” Telling someone “there is a method in my madness” is a way of asking him to trust you until the outcome becomes more apparent. Is this not precisely what Hegel is doing? He deploys the “method” of what appears a chaotic madness – say, the revolutionary Terror was for him not a shocking exception but the immanent result of the revolutionary process. Hegel doesn't obliterate

the “madness of reason itself”; his entire thought is an effort to conceptualize it.

Hegel’s system is mad, but there is method in it. For some, the madness resides in this method itself, in his reduction of all the wealth of reality to the rational dialectical frame – there is no place in Hegel for the miracles of unexpected, for radical breaks in the flow of history, for mysteries that remain mysteries – this is the thesis of Laszlo Foldenyi,<sup>3</sup> who opposes Hegel’s rationalism to Dostoyevsky’s openness for the divine miracle, horrors of history, etc. But a Hegelian answer to this is that “miracles” (ruptures) have their impact only in the way they disturb the predominant established order. Jesus Christ is a miracle, a unique event, whose appearance not only interrupted the established order but led to the rise of a new order – his rupture *matters only* insofar as it was a rupture in the rational order, and such ruptures are the topic of Hegel’s dialectic. Hegel deals with the “madness” of the rational order itself, and this madness can be defined as a series of infinite judgments in which the highest momentarily coincides with the lowest. Let’s take an extreme example from today’s world. Drawing on the work of Paolo Virno and Bertrand Ogilvie, Aaron Schuster deploys how

contemporary capitalism, emphasizing flexibility, responsabilization (the “resolute” assumption of anxiety and risk), permanent precariousness, the gig economy, continuing education, reinvention, self-branding, entrepreneurialism, and the need to adapt to unpredictable situations, is not so much an alienation of human nature as fashioned in its very image.<sup>4</sup>

Schuster ironically refers to this overlapping of radical opposites (existential authenticity of assuming one’s fate and making a lone decision; the need of the precarious entrepreneur to adapt to ever-changing situations) as “Heidegger *avec* Trump” – yet another variation of Lacan’s “Kant *avec* Sade”: Trump’s “You’re fired” (from his TV series *The Apprentice*) as a pseudo-authentic call to resolutely assume one’s nothingness:

In the resolute assumption of this primordial guilt lies the possibility of emancipation, of becoming the singular, unexchangeable existence that one is. On the other hand, the capitalist “You’re fired!” puts one entirely at the mercy of the Other: it reveals *Dasein* as beholden to an Other that has always already rejected it. / Capital aims to capture a responsabilized *Dasein* in its freedom, creativity, spontaneity, and singularity, while at the same time positioning it as something that is not thrown but thrown out, trashed, entirely exchangeable and eliminable. /.../ Being eliminated, trashed, or thrown out – the inculcation of nothingness as a means of capture – is the other side of those descriptions of capital that emphasize its frenetic productivity, creative dynamism, proliferating flows, communicative networks, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

But is a worker not always threatened by unemployment? A subtle reversal is at work here, with the rise of precarious workers: in classic capitalism, the zero level, the universal status of a worker is being employed for a wage, and unemployment is a particular threat, while with precarious workers, being unemployed is their universality, which they (try to) escape by one after another short-term contract – when they get such a contrast, they are “grateful for the opportunity of being exploited” ... (In this sense, tenured professors will more and more appear as rarities from the old time of traditional universities.)

This doesn’t mean that being a precarious worker is the “truth” of authentic *Dasein* resolutely assuming responsibility, the moment when, to put it in Hegelese, authentic existential stance appears in its oppositional determination. But the figure of precarious worker nonetheless provides a strangely distorted empirical actualization of the notion of resolutely assuming responsibility – not as a unique authentic moment but as a permanent feature of our daily life, of what Heidegger would have called “falling” (*Verfallen*), of abandoning oneself to the anonymous “one does it.” Maybe, there is a quite simple way out of this predicament (a way that undoubtedly would have appalled Heidegger): there is a potential of authentic freedom in precarious work, and we can actualize this potential by supplementing

precariousness work with something like Universal Basic Income, which takes care of our “inauthentic” daily life and provides the free space to practice authenticity – not only is the truth of the highest the lowest, in a topsy-turvy world the lowest also contains a potential for the highest.

Is the latest case of such a coincidence of the opposites in our daily lives not the Covid pandemic? All our knowledge of and domination over nature made us helpless victims of life at its most stupid, a simple replicating mechanism of a virus ... So, can we think the Covid epidemics through Hegel’s eyes? How should we change our perception of Hegel to be able to think it? The obvious automatic reaction of most philosophers is: of course not, since Hegel is an absolute idealist whose premise is that reason is everywhere, ruling the world, so that the idea that a natural disaster like an asteroid or a virus can pose a threat to humanity is unthinkable within his horizon. Is nature for Hegel not in itself, ontologically, just a background for spirit – or, as Kant put it, God created the world so that the spiritual conflict between good and evil in human history can take place in it ... But is it as simple as this? Are crazy unexpected reversals not the very stuff of Hegel’s thought? Does Hegel’s notion of nature as the Idea in its externality with regard to itself not amount to the full acceptance of the fact that nature (with its laws) follows its own path, including cosmic catastrophes, with its total indifference toward human history (an asteroid hitting the earth would occur necessarily, obeying natural laws, but it would be meaninglessly contingent from the standpoint of human history)?

But this general openness toward contingency is not all that a Hegelian approach can tell us about the virus. Let’s shamelessly quote a popular definition: viruses are “any of various infectious agents, usually ultramicroscopic, that consist of nucleic acid, either RNA or DNA, within a case of protein: they infect animals, plants, and bacteria, and reproduce only within living cells: viruses are considered to be non-living chemical units or sometimes living organisms.” This oscillation between life and death is crucial: viruses are neither alive nor dead in the usual sense of these terms; they are a kind of living dead – a virus is alive due to its drive to replicate, but it is a kind of zero-level life, a



biological caricature, not so much of death-drive as of life at its most stupid level of repetition and multiplication. However, viruses are not the elementary form of life out of which more complex systems developed; they are purely parasitic, they replicate themselves through infecting more developed organisms (when a virus infects us, humans, we simply serve as its copying machine). It is in this coincidence of the opposites – elementary and parasitic – that resides the mystery of viruses: they are a case of what Schelling called “*der nie aufhebbare Rest*”: a remainder of the lowest form of life that emerges as a product of malfunctioning of higher mechanisms of multiplication and continues to haunt (infect) them, a remainder that cannot ever be re-integrated into the subordinate moment of a higher level of life.

Here we again encounter what Hegel calls the speculative judgment, the assertion of the identity of the highest and the lowest. Hegel’s best-known example is “Spirit is a bone” from his analysis of phrenology in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and our example should be “Spirit is a virus” – is human spirit also not some kind of virus that parasitizes the human animal, exploits it for its own self-reproduction, and sometimes threatens to destroy it? And, insofar as the medium of spirit is language, we should not forget that, at its most elementary level, language is also something mechanic, a matter of rules we have to learn and follow?

Richard Dawkins claimed that memes are “viruses of the mind,” parasitic entities that “colonize” the human mind, using it as a means to multiply themselves<sup>6</sup> – the idea whose originator was none other than Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy is usually perceived as a much less interesting author than Dostoyevsky – a hopelessly outdated realist, for whom there is basically no place in modernity, in contrast to Dostoyevsky’s existential anguish. Perhaps, however, the time has come to fully rehabilitate Tolstoy, his unique theory of art and man in general, in which we find echoes of Dawkins’ notion of memes. “A person is a hominid with an infected brain, host to millions of cultural symbionts, and the chief enablers of these are the symbiont systems known as languages”<sup>7</sup> – is this passage from Dennett not pure Tolstoy? The basic category of Tolstoy’s anthropology is *infection*: a human subject is a

passive empty medium infected by affect-laden cultural elements, which, like contagious bacilli, spread from one to another individual. And Tolstoy goes here to the end: he does not oppose to this spreading of affective infections a true spiritual autonomy, he does not propose a heroic vision of educating oneself into a mature autonomous ethical subject by way of getting rid of the infectious bacilli. The only struggle is the struggle between God and bad infections: Christianity itself is an infection, although a good one.

But is “The Spirit is a virus,” read in this way, not parallel to the vulgar-materialist reading of “The Spirit is a bone”? Does it not imply that there is no speculative identity of the *opposites* here since “Spirit” really is a different kind of virus? No: the difference is that Covid is biological reality, while Spirit is part of a virtual space present in reality only through its effects. The parasitic status of Spirit (i.e., human universe of meaning) is confirmed by its non-psychological character – Jacques Lacan coined the term “the big Other” to emphasize the “objective” status of the symbolic order in which we dwell. Language is not part of nature, but it is also a normative order, which cannot be reduced to our mental processes. Another version of these three levels was proposed by no other than Karl Popper in his theory of the Third World (which is Popper’s name for the symbolic order). Popper became aware that the usual classification of all phenomena into external material reality (from atoms to arms) and our inner psychic reality (of emotions, wishes, experiences) is not enough: ideas we talk about are not just passing thoughts in our minds, since these thoughts refer to something that remains the same, while our thoughts pass away or change (when I think about  $2 + 2 = 4$  and my colleague thinks about it, we are thinking about the same thing, although our thoughts are materially different; when, in a dialogue, a group of people talk about a triangle, they somehow talk about the same thing; etc.). Popper is, of course, not an idealist: ideas do not exist independently of our minds, they are the result of our mental operations, but they are nonetheless not directly reducible to them – they possess a minimum of ideal objectivity. It is in order to capture this realm of ideal objects that Popper coined the term

“Third World,” and this Third World vaguely fits what he calls the symbolic order or the “big Other.”

Some Leftists evoke a further parallel here: is capital also not a virus parasitizing on us, humans; is it also not a blind mechanism bent on expanded self-reproduction in total indifference to our suffering? There is, however, a key difference at work here: capital is a virtual entity, which doesn't exist in reality independently of us – it only exists insofar as we, humans, participate in the capitalist process. As such, capital is a spectral entity: if we stop acting as if we believe in it (or, say, if a state power nationalizes all productive forces and abolishes money), capital ceases to exist, while virus is part of reality, which can be dealt with only through science. This, however, does not mean that there is no link between the different levels of viral entities: biological viruses, digital viruses, capital as a viral entity ... The coronavirus epidemic itself is clearly not just a biological phenomenon affecting humans: to understand its spread, one has to include human culture (food habits), economy, and global trade, the thick network of international relations, ideological mechanisms of fear and panic.

When we live in such a messy and opaque situation of multiple crises, we feel the double need to orient ourselves, to acquire a cognitive mapping of our situation, and to intervene in the situation to make our world a better place: “How can and how should the story of the present be told? In particular, how can it be told, when the present is a situation of crisis and fragmentation that does not seem to lend itself to easy conceptualization and straightforward narrative? How can the story of the present be told from the position of immanence; that is, while living in the present, immersed in the crisis of the present?”<sup>8</sup> Angelica Nuzzo is right to see in Hegel's *Logic* “the candidate of choice for the understanding of the present age of epochal transformation, the philosophical tool that can help us weave the much-needed story of the crises we are presently living.”<sup>9</sup> Hegel is making here a precise point: the cognitive mapping of our own situation is simultaneously *necessary* and *impossible*. It is necessary because we are condemned to it: all history is the history of the writer's present; whatever we write about

is irreducibly marked by our own situation; we always write from our own standpoint. But this standpoint itself is what forever eludes us: we cannot ever turn our gaze toward ourselves and locate ourselves in our situation.

## Reconciliation in Hegel

The crisis we are in calls for reconciliation, but every project of reconciliation reveals itself to be caught in the predicament it tries to leave behind. What, then, does Hegel, who is fully aware of this paradox, mean by reconciliation?

In a hotel where I stayed just before the Covid outbreak, I saw on the wall in a corridor a small poster saying: “Descartes: To do is to be. Nietzsche: To be is to do. Sinatra: Do be do be do.” In this perverted version of the Hegelian triad, the “synthesis” of the two conceptual positions (the Cartesian point that whatever you are doing, even just doubting, you have to be, to exist, and Nietzsche’s point that being is not a substantial entity that precedes our doing – we are just what we do) is not a higher conceptual unity but a recourse to the blabla of what Lacan called *llanguage (lalangue)*. Many critics of Hegel would agree that the Hegelian “synthesis” is often not a true synthesis of the two opposed poles of an antinomy or contradiction but a worthless empty gesture, which doesn’t amount to much more than a similar blabla. Hegel opens his thought to the madness of historical reversals, but his approach simultaneously sets a limit to madness – we can always be sure that some form of final “synthesis” or “reconciliation” will restore the overall rational order, and this final “synthesis” is ultimately a fake, an empty gesture.

But what if such readings of Hegel miss the point of what takes place in the infamous Hegelian “synthesis” or “reconciliation” of the opposites? What if the Hegelian “reconciliation” is nothing more than the reconciliation *with* this madness, with no prospect of a future in which this madness will be left behind? Hegel is the philosopher most open to the future, precisely because he explicitly prohibits any project of how our future should look – as he says toward the end of the “Preface” to

his *Philosophy of Right*; like the Owl of Minerva, which takes off at dusk, philosophy can only paint “gray on gray,” i.e., it only translates into a “gray” (lifeless) conceptual scheme a form of life which already reached its peak and entered its decline (becoming “gray” itself).<sup>[10](#)</sup> This is why we should reject all those readings of Hegel that see in his thought an implicit model of a future society reconciled with itself, leaving behind the alienations of modernity – I call them the “not-yet-there Hegelians.” With his last masterpiece *The Spirit of Trust*,<sup>[11](#)</sup> Robert Brandom asserted himself as perhaps the most prominent “not-yet-there Hegelian”: for him, Hegel outlines an ideal (formulated in liberal terms of mutual recognition), which we did not yet reach. In a short text on Hegel, Judith Butler provides a succinct version of this “not-yet-there” stance:

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, /Hegel/ shows us that we are not simply solitary creatures, disconnected from one another, although he knows very well that we sometimes see ourselves precisely in that way. /.../ only as a social being can I begin to reflect upon myself. It is in the course of encountering another that I stand a chance to become self-conscious.

Hegel reviews for us a dramatic scene in which one human subject seeks to destroy another, and then another extended scene in which one human subject seeks to destroy another, and then another extended scene in which one human subject seeks to dominate another. Destruction and domination turn out not to work very well. One reason they fail is that modes of acting seek to deny both social interdependency and reciprocal ethical obligation. /.../ Only as alive and social do we stand a chance of knowing ourselves, and once we come to know ourselves, we grasp the way in which we are fundamentally tied to others and the sensuous conditions of our own existence: the earth as a network of living processes. /.../ And this means that I cannot destroy another's life without attacking a set of living processes of which I am a part. In other words, in destroying another's life, I destroy my own.

Hegel takes account of angry and destructive relations as well as the lethal ruse of social domination. He understands the fury of the individual who wants no one to be like him or equal to him. And yet, he leads us to the realization that I cannot do away with this other without also doing away with myself, that I cannot dominate another without losing track of the social equality that ideally defines us both. At the moment that destroying or dominating the other are ruled out as possibilities, I realize that I am bound to this other who is bound to me, and that my life is bound up with the other's life.<sup>[12](#)</sup>

This long passage was worth quoting because it resumes the future-oriented reading of Hegel – which is why I find it problematic. Yes, I am bound to the other who is bound to me, but it is only *through* destroying/dominating that mutual recognition emerges: we arrive at

mutual solidarity only through acting as solitary and suffering consequences. Butler begins with the claim that “we are not simply solitary creatures, disconnected from one another” – OK, but who exactly is saying that we are “simply solitary creatures, disconnected from one another”? *Hegel himself* posits this as a thesis, which he then undermines through its immanent self-deployment. And it is not that once we realize this mutual dependence we can then enjoy it forever, we can go on living in a blissful state of mutual recognition. The path to truth is part of the truth, *la vérité surgit de la méprise*, all there is is struggle, violence, domination, and the story of how it fails, the calvary of the spirit. And what about the claim that “I cannot destroy another’s life without attacking a set of living processes of which I am a part. In other words, in destroying another’s life, I destroy my own” – really? An obvious example: what about fighting Hitler, trying to defeat the Nazi Germany? In Hegel’s thought, violence does not emerge as a possibility but as an ethical necessity, and remains there up to the end – the end of Hegel’s philosophy of right is *war* as the ultimate point of reference of ethical order. To make this key point clear, let’s recall the well-known passage from *Phenomenology* in which, analyzing the infinite judgment of phrenology “the Spirit is a bone,” Hegel draws the parallel with the double function of penis:

The depth which the Spirit brings forth from within – but only as far as its picture-thinking consciousness where it lets it remain – and the ignorance of this consciousness about what it really is saying, are the same conjunction of the high and the low which, in the living being, Nature naively expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfilment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination. The infinite judgement, qua infinite, would be the fulfilment of life that comprehends itself; the consciousness of the infinite judgement that remains at the level of picture-thinking behaves as urination.<sup>13</sup>

Hegel’s point is NOT that, in contrast to the vulgar empiricist mind, which sees only urination, the proper speculative attitude has to choose insemination. The paradox is that the direct choice of insemination is

the infallible way to miss it: it is not possible to choose directly the “true meaning,” i.e. one *has* to begin by making the “wrong” choice (of urination) – the true speculative meaning emerges only through the repeated reading, as the after-effect (or by-product) of the first, “wrong,” reading. When we read the statement “the Spirit is a bone” literally, in the sense of phrenology, we cannot but be shocked by its absurdity, by the infinite gap that separates Spirit from a bone – and this gap *is* the infinite negativity of the Spirit.

The same goes for social life, in which the direct choice of the “concrete universality” of a particular ethical life-world can only end in a regression to pre-modern organic society that denies the infinite right of subjectivity as the fundamental feature of modernity. Since the subject-citizen of a modern state can no longer accept his immersion in some particular social role that confers on him a determinate place within the organic social Whole, the only way to the rational totality of the modern State leads through the horror of the revolutionary Terror: one should ruthlessly tear up the constraints of the pre-modern organic “concrete universality,” and fully assert the infinite right of subjectivity in its abstract negativity. In other words, the point of Hegel’s deservedly famous analysis of the revolutionary Terror in his *Phenomenology* is not the rather obvious insight into how the revolutionary project involved the unilateral direct assertion of abstract Universal Reason, and was as such doomed to perish in self-destructive fury, since it was unable to organize the transposition of its revolutionary energy into a concrete stable and differentiated social order; Hegel’s point is rather the enigma of why, in spite of the fact that revolutionary Terror was a historical deadlock, we have to pass through it in order to arrive at the modern rational State.

But is it not obvious how the whole point of Hegel is that, through all these deadlocks, a final reconciliation arises? Yes, but what, exactly, *is* this reconciliation? What Brandom ignores in his “not-yet-there” Hegelianism is the basic opposition between the common-sense approach and Hegel’s approach: in the common-sense approach, when inconsistency (“contradiction”) arises it signals that we missed the object we wanted to grasp – object in itself is by definition consistent,



this is the definition of reality. For Hegel, on the contrary, an insurmountable inconsistency signals that we touched the real of the object – inconsistency is not something to be overcome or left behind but the very core of any entity, and *reconciliation is the reconciliation with this paradox*. In other words, reconciliation as the retroactive realization that what we were searching for is already here, is a constative at its purest, in contrast to a performative (a speech act which intervenes in the reality it describes and changes it – like “This session is closed” – which effectively closes the session).

However, the paradox is that, precisely as a pure constative, the gesture of reconciliation (what Hegel calls “*das versöhnende Ja*” – the reconciling Yes), of just taking note (contending) that what we were looking for or striving to arrive at is already here, radically changes reality – it changes it more than any active intervention into it. The reason is that reality is not just what there is but also its ideological supplements, symbolic fictions that structure reality, false hopes and fears. For example, the idea that the future is open, that in the next turn of events we will be the lucky ones and get rich, is part of the economic reality of capitalism. If we subtract this false opening, if we realize that this false opening (what, in the US, they call “the American dream”) is part of reality itself, condemned to remain just a dream, reality is no longer what it was – this subtraction works like a “mute” button, which allows us to see what we see in all its ridiculous misery, deprived of the false depth of its vocal supplement. And, once we do this, once reality is exposed in all its misery, it opens itself up to an actual change.

Reconciliation has a strangely subtle status in Hegel’s thought – suffice it to recall his advocacy of the death penalty: through the act of legal execution, the guilty subject is reconciled with the substantial ethical order and in this sense forgiven, his debt is paid, the wound of his crime is healed, which is why the death penalty is a subject’s right; that is, through it, he is recognized as a free agent. Hegel uses the term “recognition” here, and all those who see in recognition Hegel’s key concept should gather the strength to accept it here also: the murderer is recognized as a free autonomous person when he is sentenced to death, and any act of “forgiving recollection” in the sense of taking into

account social circumstances that made him a murderer deprives him of his freedom ...

No wonder that, in *Phenomenology*, reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) clearly also has an aspect of resignation: one has to accept that *la vérité surgit de la méprise*, that the Good arises only through egotist evil, that there is no way of bypassing this. This is why historical reality is a space of resignation and, after the chapter on Spirit that concludes with resignative reconciliation, Hegel passes to art, religion, and philosophy, which are at a distance from historical reality.

To put it succinctly, if the path to truth, the path that leads through terrible wounds, is followed by a new society of solidary recognition, then wounds do not disappear, are not undone – they remain as a painful memory of the horrible past, at its best as the painful price we had to pay to reach freedom. Hegel's point is much more radical: the wound is retroactively undone, it is not transformed into a particular necessary step to a brighter future, it *disappears* when we reach the standpoint of Absolute Knowing – how?

Absolute Knowing is not a state we reach where we can finally live fully reconciled in mutual recognition: in AK we fall back on repeating the path to truth, since we realize that truth is nothing but the path to truth – there is nothing outside this path, outside this succession of failures. As Hegel says at the very conclusion of *Phenomenology*, history is the calvary of absolute Spirit – and one should note here that calvary means “place of the skull,” so that this contra-position of Spirit and skull (a bone) cannot but recall Hegel's famous infinite judgment “The Spirit is a bone.”<sup>14</sup> Or, as Rocio Zambrana put it in a concise way: “Absolute Knowing recollects all such failures by presenting them in a ‘gallery of pictures’”<sup>15</sup> – it just presents them (in the strict Hegelian sense of *Darstellung*), without implying a positive standard that all these pictures fail to meet.

Therein resides the crux of the matter. The wonderful title of Gerard Lebrun's first book on Hegel from 1973 – *La patience du concept*, *The Patience of the Concept* – can be read in two opposed ways: as a trust in

the teleology of history (when you think you are caught in a chaotic meaningless mess of events, be patient, wait and analyze and you will see that there is a deeper meaning behind this mess), or as the assertion of radical contingency (the stories that we tell ourselves about the chaotic mess we're in always come too late, after the fact, they are themselves contingent attempts to organize our experience into a meaningful Whole). Although the first reading is the usual one, the second one is the only option if one wants to assert Hegel as our contemporary. Here, everything is decided – if we make the second choice, we should reject what Brandom sees as the “principal positive practical lesson of Hegel’s analysis of the nature of modernity, the fruit of his understanding of the One Great Event in human history”:

if we properly digest the achievements and failures of modernity, we can build on them new, better kinds of institutions, practices, and self-conscious selves – ones that are normatively superior because they embody a greater self-consciousness, a deeper understanding of the kind of being we are. 456

Along these lines, Brandom proposes three stages of socio-ethical development: in Stage One (traditional societies), we get *Sittlichkeit* (the order of mores accepted as a natural fact) but no modern subjectivity; in Stage Two, we get alienation – modern subjectivity gains its freedom but is alienated from the substantial ethical order; finally, in Stage Three that is on the horizon, we get a new form of *Sittlichkeit* compatible with free subjectivity:

The new form of explicit philosophical self-consciousness is only the beginning of the process, because new practices and institutions will also be required to overcome the structural alienation of modern life. 458

Really? So, what about Hegel’s insistence that philosophy can only paint “gray on gray” since, like the Owl of Minerva, it takes off only in dusk? Brandom talks here like Marx: Absolute Knowing is for him (as Marx put it about the revolutionary thought) like the singing of a Gallic cock in the new dawn, it “ushers” in a new social age when “new practices

and institutions will also be required to overcome the structural alienation of modern life" ...

Brandom's three stages are generated along the two axes: *Sittlichkeit* or no *Sittlichkeit* and modern free subjectivity or no subjectivity, so that we get traditional society (*Sittlichkeit* without free subjectivity), modern society (free subjectivity without *Sittlichkeit*), and the forthcoming postmodern society (*Sittlichkeit* with free subjectivity). Brandom immediately raises the question of the status of the fourth term, which fits none of the three stages, the "X" in his scheme, the situation with no *Sittlichkeit* and no free subjectivity: "What is wrong with the idea of premodern alienation?" (458). But why does he automatically read the absence of free subjectivity as "premodern"? What about a properly "postmodern" option of losing free subjectivity and nonetheless remaining within alienation? Is this not what the so-called "totalitarianism" is about? And is this also not the state we are approaching with so-called digitalized authoritarianism? Would this not be a properly Hegelian insight into a dialectics of modernity – we want to overcome the gap of alienation between substantial *Sittlichkeit* and free subjectivity, who no longer recognizes mores as its own, but instead of bringing them together in a kind of higher synthetic unity we *lose both*? Did Stalinism not promise to implement the synthesis between a strong communal spirit and free individuality, calling this synthesis "actual freedom" as opposed to alienated formal freedom – and was the result not the loss of freedom itself in conditions of total alienation?

More precisely, there are three levels to be distinguished here: norms as such (the ethical substance, "big Other"); subjective attitudes toward norms; institutions and social practices which give body to norms. Brandom mentions this in passing when he claims that pure consciousness "reflects on the relations between norms and the institutions that embody them, on the one hand, and their relations to the subjective normative attitudes of those whose practice they govern, on the other" (488). In a system that functions in a cynical way, we have public norms, we have individuals who participate in the rituals and institutions that enact these norms, but their participation not only

doesn't imply the appropriate inner attitude of accepting these norms – there are systems of norms and ideological rituals that function only on condition that they are not “taken seriously” by the participating individuals.<sup>[16](#)</sup>

## **“Forgiving Recollection”: Yes, but ...**

Brandom sees the key to the Third Stage in the notion of “forgiving recollection” deployed by Hegel toward the end of the chapter on Spirit in his *Phenomenology*: the gap that separates the acting subject and its severe judge is there overcome through their reconciliation when not only the agent confesses his sin but the judge also confesses the unilaterality of his own position, his participation in what he condemns: “Evil is also the gaze which sees evil everywhere around it.” Brandom’s notion of forgiving recollection is very useful today: it enables us to see what is false in precisely those who advocate tolerance and reject “hate speech.” Is today an exemplary case of a rigid moral judgment not a Politically Correct subject who sternly condemns those who are accused of practicing “hate speech”? We all know how swift and cruel such judgments can be – one wrong word, one joke considered inappropriate, and your career can be in ruins.

Remember what recently happened to the film critic David Edelstein.<sup>[17](#)</sup> Edelstein made a rather tasteless joke on his private Facebook page, regarding the death of *Last Tango in Paris* director Bernardo Bertolucci: “Even grief is better with butter,” accompanied by a still of Maria Schneider and Marlon Brando from *Last Tango in Paris* (the infamous anal rape scene); he quickly deleted it (before the public outcry broke out, not as a reaction to it!). Actress Martha Plimpton tweeted it to her followers at once: “Fire him. Immediately.” Which happened the next day: Fresh Air and NPR announced that they were cutting ties with Edelstein because the post had been “offensive and unacceptable, especially given Maria Schneider’s experience during the filming of *Last Tango in Paris*” ... So, what are the implications (or, rather, the unstated rules) of this incident? Laura Kipnis noted that, first, “there’s nothing inadvertent about inadvertent offenses”: they cannot be excused as

momentary mistakes since they are treated as revelatory of the true character of the offender. This is why one such offense is a permanent mark against you, however apologetic you might be: "One flub and you're out. An unthinking social media post will outweigh a 16-year track record." The only thing that might help is a long permanent process of self-critical self-examination: "Failure to keep re-proving it implicates you in crimes against women." You have to prove it again and again since, as a man, you are a priori not trusted: "men are not to be believed, they will say anything" ... What would have meant here "recollective forgiving"? The accused should not just forgive the offender the "hate speech" act he was responsible for, she should also confess and renounce *her own hatred* – great hatred is easily discernible in such Politically Correct inexorable demands for swift punishment, definitely more hatred than in the condemned act itself. A paraphrase of Hegel's dictum about Evil fits perfectly here: "Hatred resides in the gaze which recognizes hatred everywhere." Most of "hate speech" definitely displays patronizing superiority, brutal irony, etc. etc., but only rarely pure hatred, which, in the case of a PC condemnation, (mis)perceives itself as well-grounded exercise of justice. Such a condemnation doesn't bother to reconstruct the reasoning that guided the offender – in this reasoning the latter perceived himself as performing a maybe tasteless display of humor but was not offensive, so that we get a duality of how things were for the (offender's) consciousness and how they were "in itself" (in the eyes of the judge or the victim who was offended). However, the same gap was at work in the PC judge's condemnation: a gap between how things stood for his consciousness (I am just passing righteous judgment) and how they were in themselves (a display of hatred aimed at destroying the life or career of the offender).

Let's take another example: in December 2016, upon learning of the sudden death of Carrie Fisher, Steve Martin tweeted: "When I was a young man, Carrie Fisher was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. She turned out to be witty and bright as well." There was an immediate backlash – Martin was accused of "objectivizing" Fisher, of focusing on her physicality instead of her talents or her impact – one

user on Twitter replied: “I think she aspired to be something higher than just being pretty. How do you want to be remembered?” So Martin deleted his tweet ... But it is easy to reconstruct Martin’s reasoning here: he wanted to show his respect for Fisher beyond her beauty since he locates his fascination with Fisher’s beauty into first encounters, and then immediately moves in with “witty and bright” – the whole point of his tweet is that she was *more* than just beautiful. This is the way a “recollectively forgiving” stance would reprimand him for not taking into account the actual effect of his tweet among women, but still forgive him by demanding of him that he should only “sublate” his homage to Fisher by way of formulating it in a more appropriate way. Nothing like this happens in the quick condemnation that just sees in his tweet a male-chauvinist objectification of women ... But there are clear limits to this notion of forgiving recollection. “Hegel incorporates, adapts, and transforms the traditions he inherits – what we will come to recognize as the way he recollectively forgives them”(514). It is not difficult to discern in the triad of incorporation, adaptation, and transformation the triple meaning (in German) of *Aufhebung* (sublation) out of which Hegel draws so much mileage: maintain, abolish, rise to a higher level. It is also easy to play the game of forgiving recollection apropos events like the French Revolution – one should recall here Hegel’s sublime words on the French Revolution from his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*:

It has been said that the French revolution resulted from philosophy, and it is not without reason that philosophy has been called *Weltweisheit* /world wisdom/; for it is not only truth in and for itself, as the pure essence of things, but also truth in its living form as exhibited in the affairs of the world. We should not, therefore, contradict the assertion that the revolution received its first impulse from philosophy. /.../ Never since the sun had stood in the firmament and the planets revolved around him had it been perceived that man's existence centers in his head, i.e. in thought, inspired by which he builds up the world of reality. /.../ not until now had man advanced to the recognition of the principle that thought ought to govern spiritual reality. This was accordingly a glorious mental dawn. All thinking being shared in the jubilation of this epoch. Emotions of a lofty character stirred men's minds at that time; a spiritual enthusiasm thrilled through the world, as if the reconciliation between the divine and the secular was now first accomplished.<sup>18</sup>

This, of course, did not prevent Hegel from coldly analyzing the inner necessity of this explosion of abstract freedom to turn into its opposite, the self-destructive revolutionary terror; however, one should never forget that Hegel's critique is immanent, accepting the basic principle of the French Revolution (and its key supplement, the Haiti Revolution). So, if Evil is particularity as opposed to the Universal, absolute Evil is the universal Good itself as exclusive of particularity, of its particular content – therein resides for Hegel the lesson of the French revolutionary terror. The same can be said for the October Revolution – but is there a limit to such recollective forgiving or *Aufhebung*? Can the same be said for Nazism? To be brutal in a simplified way: can we also “recollectively forgive” Hitler? And if the answer is no, is this because Hitler cannot be in this sense forgiven or because we ourselves are not yet at the high enough level of ethical reflection to do it? The only way to avoid regression to the position of a “beautiful soul” (which passes judges from an external position exempted from its object) is to endorse the second option – that our castigation of Hitler as evil must be a reflexive determination of the Evil that persists in ourselves, i.e., of



the non-reflected particularity that persists in our own position from which we pass judgments. Let us note that many Rightist revisionists today try to enact precisely such a recollective forgiving of Hitler: yes, he made terrible mistakes, he committed horrible crimes, but in doing this, he was just fighting for the ultimately good cause (against the capitalist corruption for him embodied in Jews) in a wrong way. (It is easy to construct a more rational and not Rightist-revisionist version of how we who condemn Nazism should also ask forgiveness: not only was anti-Semitism by far not limited to Germany but was very strong in the nations which were at war with Germany; not only did the obvious injustice of the Treaty of Versailles as an act of revenge against the defeated Germany also contribute to the Nazi rise to power; at a more general level, fascism grew out of the dynamics and antagonisms of Western capitalism in which also those who were its victims fully participated.) These revisionists also try to balance responsibility in a pseudo-Hegelian way: were Hitler's crimes not mirrored in the one-sidedness of the Jewish position (their exclusive stance, their unwillingness to integrate themselves into the German nation)? While we should totally reject this line of reasoning, the solution is definitely not to draw a line between sins that could be recollectively forgiven and those which are too strong and cannot be – such a procedure introduces a duality which is totally at odds with Hegel's approach. What one should do is to change the very notion of recollective forgiving: to deprive this notion of any echoes of "you are now forgiven, you are no longer really bad." Brandom, of course, raises this problem, and his solution is that:

we must ask: Whose fault is it that the doing, or some aspect of it, is unforgivable – the doer or the forgiver? Is the failure that of the bad agent or of the bad recollector? Is whose fault it is a matter of how things anyway just are? Or is it at least partly reflective of the recollector's failure to come up with a more norm-responsive narrative?

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But, again, should we in the case of the Holocaust also "acknowledge at least equal responsibility on the part of the unsuccessful forgiver"(717)? And should we also claim that "one must trust that this

recollective-recognitive failure, too – like the failure of the original, inadequately forgiven doer – will be more successfully forgiven by future assessors (who know more and are better at it)”(718)?

Furthermore, what about the cases like cliterodectomy (or torture, or slavery in general), which we today experience as horror but for which it is easy to reconstruct the normative background that makes them acceptable not only for those who perform it but even for their victims? What about such cases where the retroactive view makes them more unacceptable than they were in their original context? Here, also we are dealing with the unity of making and finding: if we sternly judge and reject such cases, we do not only make new norms and impose them onto the past acts, we in some sense also *find* that such acts were always unacceptable even if they appeared acceptable to the agents.

Let’s again take the example of Hitler and holocaust: the way to deal with it is perhaps indicated by the biblical story of Habbakuk’s complaint, the most poignant expression of what one might call “the silence of gods,” of the big question addressed to God from Job onwards: “Where were you when that horror /holocaust, etc./ happened? Why were you silent, why didn’t you intervene?” – here are the words of this complaint:

How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

So how does God answer it? One should read this reply very carefully: “Look at the nations and watch – and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.” There is no simple teleological justification here in the style of: “Be patient, strange are the ways of the lord, your suffering serves a purpose in the wider divine plan that you cannot grasp from your narrow finite standpoint ...” – to say that holocaust (or anything similar to it) serves some higher purpose unknown to us is an anti-Christian

obscurity, since the whole point of Christ's compassion is the unconditional solidarity with those who suffer. To use yet again Agamben's expression, one should gather here a full courage of hopelessness.

Back to the Holocaust: what does it mean that we should be "utterly amazed," and that something will happen that we "would not believe, even if we were told"? While utter amazement can be read as referring to the incomprehensible horror of the Holocaust, the unbelievable thing that happened later was the founding of the state of Israel, which, one might surmise, would not have happened without the Holocaust, and only in this sense could Hitler be retroactively "forgiven" by the existence of Israel, to which his crimes contributed. But, again, one has to be very precise here: this in no way justifies holocaust as the sacrifice Jews were ready to pay for the return to their land (the thesis of some anti-Semites), or the claim that holocaust was part of a secret divine plan to make possible the return of Jews to their homeland (also the thesis of some anti-Semites) – it just means that the founding of Israel was an unexpected and unplanned consequence of the Holocaust. And it also says nothing about other injustices that resulted from this set of acts: the land to which Jews returned was for a long time inhabited by other people and cannot be simply designated as "theirs."

Here we encounter the topic of parallax which is not just the unsurpassable ontological feature of an inconsistent universe; it is also operative in the very heart of our ethical experience – let's try to demonstrate this through a recent example. The US Republican Senator Tom Cotton caused an uproar when he said that the nation's founders viewed slavery as a "necessary evil" needed to build a union, and in this way put slavery itself on a course to extinction.<sup>19</sup> But did Marx not basically say the same in his comments on the British colonization of India? Cruel as it was, it brought India onto the path of modernity. The trap to avoid here is that of retroactive justification: in the same way that, as we have already seen, the fact that holocaust helped to establish the state of Israel doesn't justify it, the fact that the British colonization of India brought it on the path to modernity in no way justifies its

horrors. More precisely, what is impossible to occupy is a neutral place, which would allow us to “objectively” judge a historical period and provide a balanced view of it: yes, British colonization did this to India, but the result of it was the rise of Indian anti-colonialist struggle, which allowed all of us to fully perceive the horrors of colonization. In short, the very retroactive “justification” of a horrible event at the same time enables us to see it in all its horror. What is impossible, a total ethical fake and lie, is for some British colonizer to say: yes, we are now doing horrible things in India, but in this way we are opening the path to the process of decolonization. In a similar way, it’s obscene to imagine an Auschwitz executioner who coldly claims: “I am really doing this in order to enable the rise of the State of Israel ...” Even if in some sense true, the objective fact of the link between holocaust and the emergence of Israel cannot be subjectivized in this way. In short, there is no higher “synthesis” between the objective view of history and ethical judgment – here also, the parallax is irreducible. So we should contest Brandom’s claim that Hegel’s ultimate goal is to elaborate “the transition from modernity to a form of normativity structured by selfconsciousness with the form of Absolute Knowing”(507): AK is not “a form of normativity,” it is a position of “absolute rest” arrived at through accepting the gap (between facts and norms) as irreducible and constitutive.

Let’s take Tito’s “No!” to Stalin in 1948, an act which led to the big schism in the Communist camp – we can give it a “noble” reading (Tito’s heroic insistence on a more authentic form of Socialism against the Stalinist horror) and a “base” reading (it was really just a power struggle, Tito was not ready to share power). And this duality should also not be too quickly identified with the duality of public and private: it is not that Tito publicly gave the “noble” reason while he privately cared only about his own exclusive power. The opposite version is also possible: Tito was involved in a public power struggle with intimate dreams of a more authentic Socialism ... Furthermore, it is also possible to have a *valet de chambre* praising for some private details a man who was in his public acts a big criminal. Decades ago, I briefly met in London an old lady who was the daughter of Stanley Baldwin, the

British Conservative Prime Minister in the 1930s. Our conversation turned to Hitler and she emphasized that she had never understood why Hitler is portrayed as such a bad guy: when, as a small girl, she met him in the company of her father, he always gently caressed her hair and spoke nicely to her ... Similarly, it was part of the Soviet mythology of their great leaders that, although history put on them a burden to do harsh things (ordering mass liquidations, etc.), they were, in private, gentle persons who loved cats and small children ...

If we concede that the actual significance of an act “will have been,” we touch here the paradoxical nerve of morality baptized by Bernard Williams “moral luck.” Williams evokes the case of a painter ironically called “Gauguin,” who left his wife and children and moved to Tahiti in order to fully develop there his artistic genius – was he morally justified in doing this or not? Williams’ answer is that we can only answer this question *in retrospect*, after we learn the final outcome of his risky decision: did he develop into a painting genius or not? Exactly the same holds for the legal status of the rebellion against a (legal) power in Kant’s writing: the proposition “what the rebels are doing is a crime which deserves to be punished” is true if pronounced when the rebellion is still going on; however, once the rebellion wins and establishes a new legal order, this statement about the legal status of the same past acts no longer holds. Here is Kant’s answer to the question “Is rebellion a legitimate means for a people to employ in throwing off the yoke of an alleged tyrant?”:

The rights of the people are injured; no injustice befalls the tyrant when he is deposed. There can be no doubt on this point. Nevertheless, it is in the highest degree illegitimate for the subjects to seek their rights in this way. If they fail in the struggle and are then subjected to severest punishment, they cannot complain about injustice any more than the tyrant could if they had succeeded. /.../ If the revolt of the people succeeds, what has been said is still quite compatible with the fact that the chief, on retiring to the status of a subject, cannot begin a revolt for his restoration but need not fear being made to account for his earlier administration of the state.<sup>20</sup>

Does Kant not offer here his own version of “moral luck” (or, rather, “legal luck”)?<sup>21</sup> The (not ethical, but legal) status of rebellion is decided retroactively: if a rebellion succeeds and establishes a new legal order, then it brings about its own *circulus vitiosus*, i.e., it erases into ontological void its own illegal origins, it enacts the paradox of retroactively grounding itself – Kant states this paradox even more clearly a couple of pages earlier: “If a violent revolution, engendered by a bad constitution, introduces by illegal means a more legal constitution, to lead the people back to the earlier constitution would not be permitted; but, while the revolution lasted, each person who openly or covertly shared in it would have justly incurred the punishment due to those who rebel.” One cannot be clearer: the legal status of the same act changes with time. What is, while the rebellion goes on, a punishable crime, becomes, after a new legal order is established, its own opposite – more precisely, it simply disappears, as a vanishing mediator which retroactively cancels/erases itself in its result.

Such a retroactive “forgiving” can only happen in the dimension of the symbolic order: when I say something, my words never just express my inner intention of meaning, their meaning is decided retroactively, through their inscription into the big Other. Italo Calvino’s “A Beautiful March Day,” a story about the death of Julius Caesar, offers an idiosyncratic description of the conspiracy against Caesar; Calvino

focuses on the unintended consequences of the act of killing Caesar: while the conspirators wanted to kill a tyrant and thereby restore Rome to its republican glory, their act abolishes the very conditions which sustained its intended meaning:

The very world in which it made sense to get rid of Caesar also vanishes with those dagger strokes – not because Caesar held that world together, but because the assassins could not foresee that their act would also transform the way the act would be judged. They could not factor in the historicity of their action: neither they nor anyone else could predict or govern how the future would interpret the assassination. Put another way, we could say that there simply was no way for them to take into account the “retroversive effect” of future interpretations.<sup>22</sup>

Let’s take an extreme case of a “forgiving recollection” (without too much forgiving, more with retroactive attribution of responsibility and guilt): someone makes a simple perspicuous observation that, till somewhere around early or even mid-20th century, most of sex would count as rape by today’s standards – this is a definitive sign of some kind of progress ... What we encounter here is the key feature of the Symbolic: it renders the fundamental “openness” the Symbolic introduces into reality. Once we enter the Symbolic, things never simply are, they all “will have been,” they as it were borrow (part of) their being from the future. This decentering introduces an irreducible contingency: there is no deeper teleology at work here, no secret power that guarantees the happy outcome. Due to his true knowledge of Hegel, Brandom has to admit this retrospective nature of historical progress:

The progression is retrospectively necessary. It is not the case that a given stage could have evolved in no other way than as to produce what appears as its successor. 608

So far so good – but Brandom continues this quote with: “The passage closes with Hegel’s expression of trust: his summons to the next generation to do for its time what he has done for his: to take on the forgiving recollective labor of explicitation that makes a rational history”(608). I find his jump to the future, this “trust” into progress,

totally unwarranted and at odds with Hegel's basic metaphysical stance – why? It implies a gap between two levels: Hegel's actual thought (constrained to its time, painting gray on gray), and a more basic universal view (meta-language) which locates Hegel's thought itself into a progressive series, into a "recognitive cycle of confession, trust, and recollective forgiveness, followed by confession of the inadequacy of that forgiveness and trust in subsequent forgiveness of that failure"(610). We are thereby fully back to what Hegel called "spurious infinity": what Hegel did for the entire past up to his time (recollecting it into a rational totality), Brandom himself tries to do to Hegel (paraphrasing his thought into contemporary terms, etc.), and he invites his future readers to do the same with his work ...

There is another aspect of the same inconsistency: if necessity is always retrospective, what legitimizes Brandom to read Hegel's idea of Absolute Knowing as going well beyond the retrospective "painting gray on gray," as pointing toward a more emancipated social future beyond the antagonisms of alienated modernity, what Brandom calls Third Phase? "Hegel's astonishing aspiration is for a morally edifying semantics. The truth shall set us free, and guide us to a new age of Geist whose normative structure is as much an improvement over the modern as the modern was over the traditional"(614). But wouldn't a proper Hegelian move be precisely to leave the space open for a retroactive realization that this bright(er) future (the Third Phase) will bring out new unpredictable antagonisms and forms of violence? What if we should be forgiven exactly for *that* – for the illusory hope that progress will go on and that we can already now do more than just paint gray on gray, to outline the basic contours of a new future epoch of full emancipation? Would it not be much more in Hegel's spirit to presuppose that this phase will also somehow go terribly wrong? (As it *did* with fascism, Stalinism ...) For example, what Marx should be "forgiven" for is that he remained blind to how his vision of Communism inspired new forms of political oppression and terror: from today's stance of forgiving recollection, it is not enough to play the usual game of how Marx's noble vision was misused, and of how he shouldn't be held accountable for this misuse.



## From Concrete Universality to Subject

To grasp properly this openness to the future that will retroactively decide the meaning of our present acts, we should make a step further from the standard understanding of what Hegel means by “concrete universality”: a universality that engenders its particular content through its self-mediation, so that it appears as one of its own particular species. Let’s begin by clarifying what concrete universality amounts to. When asked in 1914 which composer of his time was the greatest, Sibelius (who, incidentally, came very close to being a Nazi sympathizer) answered without hesitation: “Schoenberg. But I also enjoy my own music.” So even he, the arch-conservative, was aware of the break enacted by Schoenberg: although he was just one composer among others, Schoenberg restructured and thus defined the entire field – to write music as before after his break was not possible; if one did it, it functioned as a fake. This brings us to the logic of concrete universality: within a complex field of multiple phenomena, the art of dialectical analysis is to discover the one (phenomenon) that overdetermines the whole of the field; this one phenomenon is not simply the exemplary case of its universality but as a rule its exception – as such, as the exception, it provides the key to the entire field. To grasp a phenomenon in its universality thus simultaneously means to grasp its limitation.

Let’s take here an example from a totally different domain. The properly Hegelian paradox is that, in today’s concrete situation in the US, the only way really to make the universal claim “All lives matter” is to say “Black lives matter,” since the oppression of blacks is today the symptomatic point, the exemplary case, of the universal oppression. The moment one says “But why only black lives? *All* lives matter!,” such a leveling cuts off the edge of the universal oppression. In a similar way, if, in Hitler’s Germany, one were to say “But why such a focus on anti-Semitism? Other races are also oppressed!,” one would have obfuscated the true horror of the Nazi racism, which is exemplified in anti-Semitism. And, one should add here, the same goes for today’s Israel with regard to how it relates to Palestinians: the only way in Israel

today to be really anti-racist is to admit that the way the State of Israel is treating Palestinians is racist. Therein resides the Hegelian “concrete universality”: there is always a particular species in which the genus encounters itself in its “oppositional determination” – or, as Marx put it in an often-quoted passage from the Introduction to *Grundrisse*: “In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.” Marx immediately provides an example: “In the Middle Ages, capital itself – apart from pure money-capital – in the form of the traditional artisans’ tools, etc., has this landed-proprietary character. In bourgeois society it is the opposite. Agriculture more and more becomes merely a branch of industry, and is entirely dominated by capital.”<sup>23</sup>

Another example: In dealing with the topic of the Covid pandemic, it is not enough just to analyze different countries one by one and describe the specific form the pandemic took there. Here enters Hegel’s difference between abstract and concrete universality. When we talk about global pandemic, we usually use “pandemic” as a neutral universal notion, which applies to all countries. However, it is clear that this universal notion is not really neutral: it secretly privileges the shape the pandemic took in some selected countries (usually it is the developed West) – this is what Hegel called “abstract universality.” What we need to do is to analyze the forms the pandemic took in different parts of the world *in their interaction*. The form of the pandemic in Western Europe, in Brazil, in China, etc., does not just mirror the particularity of that part of the world: this particularity itself emerged through global interaction. For example, one cannot understand the forms of the pandemic in countries of Latin America without analyzing the way Latin America is caught in neo-liberal capitalism, the way it is the victim of neo-colonialist exploitation. This concrete network of inter-dependencies is what Hegel called “concrete universality.”

Of course, things get even more complicated here: among the particular historical forms of a universality, there is only one particular form in which this universality appears as such, in its abstraction – for Marx, the example of labor “shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations.” But what interests us here is how the same logic of concrete universality applies to racism – let’s paraphrase Marx: in all forms of society there is one specific kind of racism, which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination, which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. In the US today, it is the anti-black racism, while in the Nazi Germany, it was the anti-Semitic racism, and in Israel today, it is the anti-Palestinian racism.

Another example: Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in Yugoslavia (part of which was Slovenia at that time), the so-called sexual revolution was widely tolerated and practiced, and I remember one peculiar sign of it even today. I had to visit a student friend of mine to borrow some lecture notes; he lived in a high-rise student block and, looking for his name at the entrance, I found there stuck on a board a note from the management saying, more or less literally, the following: we got complaints from some students who live here that the group-sex orgies going on in rooms next to theirs are so loud at night that they cannot sleep or study in peace, so please, when you are engaged in group sex at night, be careful not to make too much noise ... What struck me is that the management had no objection to group sex as such, it just wanted to protect those in nearby rooms from the noise of it. At that point, reserved as I was, this note appeared to me as something comparable to a note sent to someone who is torturing a person next door: “The screams of pain of your victim disturb my sleep, so could you please do your job with less noise – say, what if you stuff the mouth of your victim?” By the way, is something like this also not

the real message of many liberals to brutalities committed by army and police – do it, just discreetly, I don't want to know about it ...

Back to my youth: At that time, sexual revolution was confined to the young generation, and most of them had to keep their sexual activities out of sight of their more conservative families. I met a fellow student, a beautiful and extremely promiscuous lady from a conservative family, who brought the combination of promiscuity and respect of the form to perfection. The publicly declared goal of her life was marriage and children, but till that moment (which she was postponing all the time, fixating at when she will be thirty-five), she discreetly engaged in a life full of drinking, drugs, and extreme promiscuity (sex with many men simultaneously, etc.). In all this, however, she unconditionally followed one rule: engage only in casual sex, which cannot lead to stable emotional link, always with different partners, with each (or a couple of them) not even for a whole night but just for a couple of hours, never (as a rule) again with the same partner, this was strictly *prohibited* (although she admitted that she sometimes repeatedly slept with the same guy – but each time they met just for a couple of hours, never fully sleeping together). To this prohibition one should give strict ethical status: promiscuity of (not even full) one-night stands was a guarantee against falling in love and forming a permanent “illegitimate” link. (If she got pregnant, here “conservative” parents organized an abortion to save the family's honor.) She thought of herself as a subversive non-conformist, and violently rejected my claim that she is the ultimate conformist ... (Today, there reigns in some circles an even more severe prohibition: the “sin” is to admit singular love passion publicly, or even to practice it discreetly. In our permissive era of polyamory, private passionate link is often prohibited as exclusive and “binary”: a true transgression is today such a passionate exclusive link, not promiscuity.) But there is another paradox lurking here: it more and more became clear that the lady was more or less systematically breaking her universal rule and sleeping with a man more than once – the true exceptions were the rare cases where she really obeyed her universal rule. This didn't mean that the universal rule was inoperative – it was operative precisely through actualizing itself as a rule in its

exceptions/violations, so that it appears in its universality only in the exception to exceptions.

However, if we want to grasp how subjectivity emerges through concrete universality, we should take a step further and include in the species of a universality its own universal negation. Back to our example of BLM: the only effective answer to the ongoing debate about the assertion that “Black lives matter” (why should we not rather say “All lives matter”?, etc.) is a wonderfully brutal meme that was circulating in the US in the Fall of 2020; it depicts Stalin holding a poster in his hands with an inscription that reads: “No lives matter.” (I leave aside here the polemics about Stalinist murders in Australia, which gave birth to this version of the meme.) The kernel of truth in this provocation is that there are things that matter more than bare life – is this not also the ultimate message of those protesting the police violence against blacks? Blacks (and those who support them) are not demanding mere survival, they are demanding to be treated with dignity, as free and equal citizens fully equal to whites, and for this they are ready to risk a lot, including (sometimes) their lives. That’s why they gather to protest even when participation in collective protests increases the risk of spreading or contracting Covid-19 infection. Subjectivity proper enters the space of universality only through this negation – and this negation also opens up every constellation to its uncertain future.

In other words, to see how subjectivity enters universality, we have to redouble exception by way of introducing an exception to exception. Let’s take yet another totally different example from popular culture: In the TV series “Columbo,” the role of exception is played by the last episode of season 5, “Last Salute to the Commodore” (1976), which subverts the standard formula of the series (first we see in detail how the murder is accomplished; then Columbo arrives on the scene and immediately knows who is the murderer, so that what we get at the end is not the answer to whodunit but the explanation of how Columbo demonstrates the murderer’s guilt). The victim (“commodore”) is a self-regarding millionaire who resents his drunken coterie and grasping family. When we witness the son-in-law disposing of the commodore’s

body at sea, it seems obvious he is the murderer. Then he also turns up dead, and the format disintegrates, everything seems off, Columbo has his head turned by transcendental meditation, attempting a lotus pose on a marina boardwalk. Eventually, all the suspects are assembled in a room so the murderer can be revealed, Agatha Christie-style, making a mockery of the show's signature device. The nice dialectical detail is here that the exception (in the series of Columbo episodes), the collapse of the Columbo formula, assumes the form of a regression to the classical whodunit formula, i.e., to the very formula whose abandonment defined the Columbo series: we don't know who the murderer is, Columbo goes wrong with his identification of the murderer ... no wonder that, in the last shot of the episode, Columbo jumps into a boat and rows off toward the open sea, presumably to join his wife, but the effect is as if as he runs away from his job (police inspector in the series) since the game is over. And in a sense the game *was* over – although Columbo went on for seven more seasons, they are out of balance, oscillating between different formulas – once the limit of the series is reflected into it, one cannot pretend it did not happen ... [24](#)

We get here a case of the triad of universality, particularity, and singularity: the standard whodunit formula sets the universal standard, the Columbo formula is a particular species, which negates some key features of the universal formula and is thus a kind of exception to it (we know from the beginning who did it, etc.), and in “The Last Salute” we get an exception to exception (the particular Columbo formula breaks down), and this breakdown occurs in the guise of the return to universality (standard whodunit formula) – and, to move to a more general level, it is only with this return to universality in the guise of exception to exception that the structure gets subjectivized. Insofar as we are dealing with the immanent self-movement a universality – a universality that divides itself into its species, becoming itself one of its species – we remain within the “idealist” domain of notional self-articulation.

Say, in the case of a state, it divides itself into three estates: the universal estate (state bureaucracy), the particular estate (farmers),

and the individual estate (commerce and industrial production). But, if this notional structure is to acquire actual individuality, another moment has to be added: the monarch in whom an individual naturally determined contingency directly coincides with universality. Humans in general are beings whose identity is “mediated” by their activity, they make themselves into what they are through their formation */Bildung/*, through hard work, while the monarch is the exception to this universality; he is by birth what he is and, as such, he gives body to (embodies) the universality of a state at the head of which he stands. This means that the universality (of the state or of a people) “liberates itself (*befreit sich*)” in him, releases itself (*entlaesst sich*) from the mere notional necessity and becomes an actually existing living human individual. This final reversal of the dialectical process of gradual sublation (*Aufhebung*) of all contingent empirical content in its immanent rational structure into a contingent empirical entity (who is the monarch is determined by the natural contingency of birth), which gives body to the rational totality of state, i.e., in which this rational totality acquires actual existence, is what gives a final materialist twist to Hegel’s idealism: the process of the sublation/mediation of immediate reality in its notional structure is not the final word of truth: universality as such has to be embodied again in a contingent material element – only at this point do we pass from objective structure to living subjectivity.

This final reversal also gives a new twist to Schelling’s notion of the “non-sublatable remainder (*unaufhebbare Rest*)”: not empirical content, which resists notional *Aufhebung*, but the embodiment of this rational totality itself. The *unaufhebbare Rest* is not (as even Brandom thinks) empirical “brute immediacy,” which continues to resist subjective conceptual grasp but *subject itself in its actuality*, which cannot be sublated since it emerges as the final twist of the process of sublation itself – what resists notional mediation is its own actual existence in the guise of some “brute immediacy.” Consequently, a Hegelian critique of Hegel should focus on how he was himself not consequent in drawing the consequences from his premises – for example, as Frank Ruda developed in detail, apropos of the notion of rabble as the necessary

*“unaufhebbare Rest”* of a social structure, its part of no-part, a group for which there is no specific place in the social edifice. Hegel ignores (in an omission that is not neutral, of course) the fact that, precisely as such, as lacking a particular place in the social edifice, rabble stands for the universality of being-human – the status of being-human as such in a given society can be directly read from the status of rabble in it. This brings us to the infinite judgment “King is rabble” as another version of “Spirit is a bone,” i.e., as a necessary supplement of “State is a King”: a populist clown-king (like already Napoleon III for Marx) whose true base is not some class but rabble, a class of no-class ...

Again, this is how we move from merely conceptual concrete universality to subject: to the concrete universality, which is the articulation of particularities through the self-movement of the universal, Hegel adds another moment in which opposites directly coincide, in which the *“unaufhebbare Rest”* of reality coincides with universality as such. Only at this point the universality in question liberates itself in the guise of an actual living subject. But let’s make here a step back and raise the more basic question: so, what *is* materialism, if for us? Chomsky’s position is that, already in the early days of modernity, materialism collapsed because there was no concept of matter that would adequately cover up what science discovered about the nature of matter:

The mind–body problem, Cartesian dual-substance theory, did collapse, with Newton – because the *body* collapsed. Newton showed, to his own dismay, that we have no clear concept of body or matter, that physics is obliged to recognize apparently mysterious immaterial forces of attraction and repulsion, action at a distance, and so on. The common-sense notion of body collapsed, along with the theory of mechanical causality that underlay much of the early modern scientific world-view.”<sup>25</sup>

The Hegelian counter-argument to this line of thought is that what we refer to as “matter” *is*, at its most basic level, that which resists conceptual grasp – matter *is* that which “disappears” when we try to squeeze it into a definite conceptual frame. This is what Hegel aimed at



with his notion of nature (i.e., material reality) as Idea in its externality: not only is material reality external to Idea, it is external (with regard) to itself, which means that it eludes conceptual grasp. Material reality is *Idea itself in its externality, in its reality*. Does this mean that, with its full conceptual grasp, nature disappears? Quite the opposite. It is not that, at the conclusion of Hegel's Logic, Idea completes its circular movement and then, in a separate act, it freely decides to externalize itself – the two moments are one and the same, the moment of completion IS the moment of radical externalization. Hegel himself designates the domain of logic as the “realm of shadows,” a domain that lacks substantial reality, and it is with the passage from logic to nature that we enter the domain of reality – we pass “from bit to it,” from notional structure to reality. This doesn't mean that some mysterious X is added to the notional structure, it just means that Idea is fully actualized as Idea, that the circle of its self-mediation is completed.

## **How does “Stubborn Immediacy” Arise?**

But where does the real enter here, the real in the Lacanian sense of impossible, of the impossibility that structures a given field? Does the real not mean that the circle of Idea's self-mediation is never completed? The only consistent way to reply to this argument is to propose an alternate reading of the end of Hegel's Logic: many attentive readers noticed that what we get at the end is not the description of a complex Idea but just a recapitulation of the path traveled, as if the true goal is the repetition of the road itself. What happens at the end of logic is that the Real of a constitutive impossibility is acknowledged as such, no longer reduced to some local or temporary obstacle that could be overcome by a better arrangement of concepts. The course of the progress of logic is sustained by the hope that a new category will resolve the deadlock of the preceding one, and what we get at the end is not a final category that does the work (“absolute Idea” or whatever) but the admission that the deadlock is constitutive. Idea passes to reality when its constitutive impossibility/failure is encountered, so that this passage is not a passage from an ideal notional order to actual external reality but a passage to reality (nature, space and time ...),

which avoids the deadlock of the real. This is the basic premise of Hegel's idealism: nature (external reality) is not just there as a primordial fact, it arises in order to obfuscate the Real of a symbolic deadlock. In the opposition between the logical "realm of shadows" and external reality, the real is on the side of the "realm of shadows."

Hegel consistently describes the Idea's passage into nature in terms of freedom or "absolute liberation" (*absolute Befreiung*) – why?<sup>26</sup> In the logic, Idea is caught in a loop of self-relating movement, unable to escape the oppressive virtual domain of some kind of mental experiments, unable to break out into its otherness, and the passage into nature is liberation in a double sense, and the key to Hegel's speculative logic is to see how the two senses coincide. The Idea liberates itself, breaks out of its suffocating enclosure, opens itself up to its otherness, but simultaneously it sets free its Other from its own grasp, giving it full autonomy. The standard reading of Hegel would dismiss this as a form of the domination of Reason: Idea sets free its Other because it knows that it remains "by itself" in its otherness, that it dominates its otherness. But a more radical reading is possible: what if we take this release of the Other in its full scope? The Idea exposes itself to nature in its full contingency, so that an asteroid can hit our earth and destroy all life on it, inclusive of humanity as the only site in which spirit becomes for-itself. The stupid self-replication of coronavirus perfectly exemplifies what Hegel aimed at with his notion of nature as Idea in its externality with regard to itself: as parts of nature, we have to accept that we are exposed to meaningless mechanisms that may destroy us. Spirit is not a higher authority controlling natural processes and guaranteeing that they will serve as the foundation of our spiritual creativity – we are totally exposed to the meaningless contingency of natural necessity. This is clear from Hegel's precise formulation, which, as it befits Hegel's dialectics, unites the opposites:

The Idea, namely, in positing itself as absolute unity of the pure concept and its reality and thus contracting itself into the immediacy of being, is the totality in this form – nature.<sup>27</sup>

Idea passes into nature the moment it fully becomes idea – prior to that it is a “realm of shadows” described in Hegel’s Logic. The “absolute unity of the pure concept and its reality” doesn’t refer to the mediated unity of the two opposites but to their immediate full unity, which means that the moment the Idea accomplishes its immanent self-mediation and fully deploys–actualizes its content, it is no longer the “realm of shadows,” since it directly acquires reality, it *is* reality – or, as Hegel writes in the final paragraph of his Logic, in the “free release” of the Idea (into/of nature) “no *transition* [Übergang] takes place” since Idea *is* reality ... but what kind or mode of reality? Not the wealth of reality permeated and articulated by the rational order but external reality at its purest and poorest, nature as the endless contingent multiplicity of space. In these senses, the Idea “contracts itself into the immediacy of being”: in the passage of logic into nature, the elaborate wealth of conceptual determinations collapses into the pure externality of space. The identity of Idea and nature is thus yet another version of the infinite judgment “*spirit is a bone*”: “there is no difference between the Idea and nature. Nature just is the Idea in its self-development, its differentiation from itself.”

This passage of self-mediation into a new immediacy brings us back to the opposition between constative and performative: in it, performative (the process of creating, “positing,” its content) turns back into constative, into just passively registering that “things are so.” When Brandom characterizes the language of belief (in some higher spiritual entity) as “performative, establishing as well as expressing social normative relations – not just saying how things objectively are, independently of the attitudes of the believers involved”(512), he skillfully avoids the enigma: if this is the case why then does Faith speak as if it is talking about objective facts? Why is this illusion, this self-obliteration of the performative status, necessary? “God the Father is the sensuously clothed image of the norm-governed community synthesized by reciprocal recognitive attitudes”(514) – where does the need for this sensuous clothing come from, and why cannot we get rid of it even after we admit it is just that, the clothing of a notional content? Reconciliation is reconciliation with this necessity ... Why is it

not possible to directly treat the ethical substance as the result of our communal activity? Because this “fetishist” illusion has to be accompanied by the opposite one – here is the key passage from Hegel’s *Encyclopedia*, worth quoting again and again, in which he deals with this opposite illusion:

In the sphere of the finite we can neither experience nor see that the purpose is genuinely attained. The accomplishing of the infinite purpose consists therefore only in sublating the illusion that it has not yet been accomplished. The good, the absolute good, fulfills itself eternally in the world, and the result is that it is already fulfilled in and for itself, and does not need to wait upon us for this to happen. This is the illusion in which we live, and at the same time it is this illusion alone that is the activating element upon which our interest in the world rests. It is within its own process that the Idea produces that illusion for itself; it posits an other confronting itself, and its action consists in sublating that illusion. Only from this error does the truth come forth, and herein lies our reconciliation with error and with finitude. Otherness or error, as sublated, is itself a necessary moment of the truth, which can only be in that it makes itself into its own result.<sup>28</sup>

There is no actual state of things in which the two sides – the reliance of subjects on their ethical substance and the dependence of this substance on subjects’ activity – can somehow dialectically co-exist: the only reconciliation possible is the reconciliation with the (double) illusion, with the fact that illusion is necessary. In these lines we find a key indication of what the Absolute Knowing is about: AK is not some final point at which the interdependence of the two sides is finally admitted (subjects’ activity has to be grounded in a Substance, but this Substance itself is only kept alive through subjects’ activity), so that after reaching this point we can go on living in happy harmony and in full cognizance of what is going on; AK is the full acceptance of the necessity of the error itself, the “reconciliation with error,” the realization that error is “a necessary moment of the truth.” Illusion does not disappear, it is “resolved” through its redoubling – how? There is a

subtle ambiguity in the quoted passage: in what, precisely, consists the (necessary) illusion? The answer seems clear: the eternal Idea, which doesn't have to wait for us, since it is always-already fulfilled, is only alive insofar as it (re)produces itself through the incessant activity of us, finite subjects; however, to motivate us to engage in this incessant activity, it has to entrap us into the illusion that it is not yet fully accomplished and that it needs us to reach its goal. So, in some sense, reconciliation always-already happened – the illusion is that reconciliation did not already happen, but this illusion is necessary since it propels subjects to incessant activity through which the Absolute “brings itself to completion” ... But what about the opposite reading – what if the very conviction that the Absolute “is already fulfilled in and for itself” is the necessary illusion that pushes us to activity? Is this not the lesson of Protestantism as well as of the hard-line Stalinism? The fact that our fate is predestined, that everything is already decided (for Stalinists, the arrival of Communism is a historical necessity) does not lead to our inactivity but pushes us to frantic activity – in our activity, we are instruments of historical necessity, actualizing what had to happen independently of our will.

So, what if Hegel's true position is that the illusion is redoubled: the Absolute “is already fulfilled in and for itself” *and* it depends on our (free individuals') activity to be kept alive? The idea of Predestination overlooks the performative dimension: yes, we are predestined, but it is only our taking note of (registering) this fact that makes it fact. And, vice versa: yes, it is our activity that keeps the absolute Substance alive but, in order for our activity to succeed, it has to generate the illusion that the Absolute “is already fulfilled in and for itself.” The relationship between these two illusions is not symmetrical: fetishist illusion (which occurs when the product of our collective activity appears to us as an independent preexisting entity) is the obvious one, the usual target of critique of ideology; but the true enigma is, as we have already seen, why cannot we get rid of it? Because human activity as the source of ethical substance is not the whole truth – to posit individuals' activity as the basic truth and to conceive ethical substance as its mere effect is also an illusion, the illusion that ignores the fact that the Absolute “is

already fulfilled in and for itself.” This second illusion is crucial for the speculative approach – why? The two illusions are related along the axis of production versus symbolic registration. The fetishist illusion designates the obfuscation of the production process in its result and, for this reason, it was a key topic of many “poststructuralist” critiques. The idea was that the reduction of our speech to an expression of inner sense or external reality ignores the fact that language is a productive activity, a “signifying practice,” as it was popular to say: the relationship between speech and its meaning is not the one between expression and its content but the one between productive activity and its result.

The opposite illusion is immanent to the symbolic order as opposed to production: while production brings out something new, a symbolic act is, at its most elementary level, the signifying taking-note-of something that has already happened independently of this act. This is why, as Hegel points out apropos Antigone, the elementary symbolic act is that of burial: the funeral ritual takes something that happened as a natural phenomenon (death) and changes it into a spiritual symbolic act. It adds nothing to what took place in reality, it just states/certifies it – *but this “nothing” is crucial and changes everything*. For example, I may be sure that I passed an exam, but I really pass it only when it is publicly announced that I did it. And what Hegel calls AK is a kind of funeral ritual for the Absolute itself, the certification of its death, the confirmation that the Absolute “is already fulfilled in and for itself.”

What this means is that the Hegelian Absolute Knowing overcomes (or, rather, reaches beneath) the Kantian duality of the alethic and the deontic. Hegel’s axiom is that we should conceive the Absolute not only as Substance but also as Subject, and this axiom provides the key to Hegel’s idealism: Substance is the positive order of reality in its material inertia, and Subject introduces into substantial reality the moment of negation, disparity, mediation, perlaboration, its “sublation” in the conceptual order. A big stone is the object out of which a sculptor makes a work of art that expresses an idea. This same inert stone can be an object of chemical analysis, which discloses its chemical and atomic structure formulated in letter-symbols and mathematic formulas. This process of perlaboration/mediation begins with life as

such, which thrives through metabolic exchange with its environs, and then reaches its summit with human labor and conceptual thinking. While for materialists like Marx humans themselves are part of nature and their metabolic exchange with nature is part of nature, Hegel as absolute idealist posits that Spirit can completely mediate/internalize external objectivity. The first who opposed Hegel's absolute idealism was Schelling with his notion of an "indivisible remainder": the Real cannot ever be fully "sublated" in the Ideal, concept cannot ever fully swallow all of substantial content ... is this, then, the basic formula of materialism? Brandom also concedes that there is always an "indivisible remainder," which is why the subjective mediation of reality is an endless process, but what he ignores is the "indivisible remainder" that arises at the opposite end, at the point of conclusion of the process of dialectical mediation: the totality of mediation becomes actual only when it gets again embodied in a little piece of immediate reality. For Brandom, "stubborn reality," which resists full conceptual sublation, is the starting point; for Hegel, the starting point is a radical self-division, disparity of the substance with itself, and a piece of "stubborn reality" marks the conclusion. This is why, when Brandom writes that we must "construe substance as an aspect of subject: as being implicitly what subject is explicitly" (689), he downplays the radicality of Hegel's thesis that Substance is also Subject: it is not only that what is implicit in substance becomes explicit in subject; it is that appearance, negativity, is already at work in the Substance. After he quotes the key passage from Hegel:

The disparity which exists in consciousness between the "I" and the substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the negative in general. /.../ Now although this negative appears at first as a disparity between the "I" and its object, it is just as much the disparity of the substance with itself. Thus what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and Substance shows itself to be essentially Subject.<sup>29</sup>

Brandom gives his comment on it: "The disparity within natural substance itself is the way its immediacy overflows every constellation

of commitments articulated by *Verstand* determinate conceptual contents, leading to a further episode of the experience of error and normatively demanding of the subject the alteration of its commitments”(689). Really? Can we really talk about how the “stubborn immediacy” of the natural substance overflows every constellation of commitments articulated by reason? Is the excess that eludes rational grasp not precisely the opposite of immediacy, the impenetrable *mediation* of empirical phenomena? Let’s take the panic caused by the coronavirus epidemics: in its immediacy, the genetic structure of the virus was quickly identified; the problem is that we are (for the time being, at least) unable to fathom how the reproduction of coronavirus is mediated by the complex network of biological and social processes. Furthermore, does Brandom’s point here not amount to the rather elementary claim that subject is not an autonomous agent external to substance, that it is always-already caught into some form of substantial immediacy it endlessly tries to conceptualize, to transpose its contingency into necessity? However, the notion of a finite subject trying to understand the elusive substance that transcends its grasp is definitely not Hegel’s position – for Hegel, the excess in objective reality that eludes the subject’s grasp is ultimately subject itself, the excess of the self-relating negativity that constitutes the core of subjectivity, what Hegel, following mystics, calls “the night of the world.” Is this not how we should read Hegel’s statement that behind the veil of appearances there is only what we put there. A further problem here is: does this formula of the infinite process of grasping reality, of transforming contingency into necessity, apply only to the empirical sphere or also to pure thinking?



The sensuous immediacy that always confronts and must be absorbed and digested into conceptual form is an inexhaustible normative motive force for change. It does not follow that what is true of empirical theories must be true of metatheories of them. Perhaps here, full expressive adequacy can be achieved. Perhaps not. It is possible that expressive progress in our metaconcepts, driven by inevitable experiences of error, inadequacy, and failure, requiring repair and recollective vindication of those repairs, is also a never-ending process. On this question, I think we should be prepared to be critical. 697

Critical toward Hegel, of course ... Here we can clearly see Brandom's oscillation. If we endorse the first option (at the level of pure concepts, full adequacy can be achieved), then we return to some kind of Kantian duality: in the empirical domain there is infinite possibility of errors and failures, but at the level of pure concepts we can articulate a definitive a priori frame. If we endorse the second option (progress in our metaconcepts is also driven by inevitable experiences of error, inadequacy, and failure), then Hegel's edifice of Absolute Knowing is also just another fallible figuration, and a meta-theory of historicity that relativizes Hegel's thought is needed. But what if what Hegel calls AK is precisely the awareness of this absolute limitation, which reaches beyond the unending process of error and inadequacy?

So, when Brandom writes that "recollection in one sense makes, and in another sense finds" (684), we should raise the obvious question: how, precisely, are these two senses related? It all depends on how we read Hegel's famous statement that, in a dialectical process, things become what they always-already are. The predominant reading is that of a teleological closed circle: the essence of things is eternally predetermined, and the process only brings out what is implicitly already there ... In this reading, subject is reduced to a subordinate moment of Substance – so how are we to assert that the Absolute should also be grasped as a Subject? The only consequent answer is to read the formula of things becoming what they already are in a much more literal way: they are really *becoming* what they always-already are, i.e., their past can be retroactively changed – one (contingently)

makes what one finds (as a deeper necessity). It is because of this retroactive/contingent becoming of what things already are that

the plight of finite knowing and acting subjects metaphysically guarantees liability to empirical error and practical failure. The experience of error is inescapable. What I earlier called the “false starts, wrong turns, and dead ends” of inquiry can be retrospectively edited out of the sanitized, Whiggish vindicating recollective narrative, but they cannot be avoided prospectively. Why not? In short because the rational, conceptual character of the world and its stubborn recalcitrance to mastery by knowledge and agency are equally fundamental, primordial features of the way things are. On the one hand, the world is lawful, articulated by alethic modal relations of incompatibility and necessary consequence, so conceptually contentful and graspable. (To “him who looks on the world rationally, the world looks rationally back,” Hegel says elsewhere.) It is, in Hegel’s terms, thoroughly “mediated.” On the other hand, it is shot through with brute immediacy, which impinges on thought through perception. 662

However, what Brandom seems to miss here is that the two hands (“on the one hand /.../ on the other hand”) are *one and the same*, in a twisted space that resembles the structure of the Moebius band: if we progress to the end on one side, making a full circle, we find ourselves on the opposite side, at our starting point. The process of notional mediation, of making–discovering a rational structure beneath the contingency of immediate reality can only be completed, brought to a conclusion (and Hegel’s axiom is that to bring stability to a form of rationality it *has* to be brought to a conclusion), through a return to some figure of “brute immediacy,” which actualizes (gives body to) the rational totality – *this* necessity of the return to immediacy is for Hegel the key feature of Reason that a mere Understanding cannot grasp. In Lacan’s terms, every rational (symbolic) edifice has to be sustained by what Lacan called *le peu du réel*, a little piece of the contingent Real which acts as *la réponse du réel*, the “answer of the Real.” Hegel was deeply aware of this paradox when he opposed ancient democracy to modern monarchy: it was precisely because the ancient Greeks did not have a figure of pure

subjectivity (a king) at the summit of their state edifice that they needed to resort to “superstitious” practices – such as looking for signs in the flight-paths of birds or in the entrails of animals – to guide the *polis* in making crucial decisions. It was clear to Hegel that the modern world cannot dispense with this contingent Real and organize social life only through choices and decisions based on “objective” qualifications (the illusion of what Lacan later called the discourse of the university): there is always some aspect of ritual involved in being invested with a title, even if the conferring of the title follows automatically from certain “objective” criteria having been met.

This is the point of Hegel’s deduction of the necessity of monarchy as the peak of the rational state: when he claims that the conception of the monarch is “of all conceptions the hardest for ratiocination, i.e., for the method of reflection employed by the Understanding,” the speculative moment that Understanding cannot grasp is “the transition of the concept of pure self-determination into the immediacy of being and so into the realm of nature.” In other words, while Understanding can well grasp the universal mediation of a living totality, what it cannot grasp is that this totality, in order to actualize itself, has to acquire actual existence in the guise of an immediate “natural” singularity. Without this concluding “quilting point,” we remain at the level of Understanding with its fixed opposition between natural immediacy and conceptual mediation – and Brandom knows it: he rejects the notion of asymptotic progress toward Truth-in-itself, and locates Truth in the process of experience. Truth-in-itself is not out there as an Other of Reason, it is produced by the experience of Reason. But if this is the case, then truth itself has to be inconsistent – and Brandom is afraid to draw this conclusion directly:

Holding on to hylomorphic conceptual realism while accepting that every constellation of determinately conceptually contentful commitments is doomed to be found to be incoherent (to include incompatible ones) would seem to yield the conclusion that the objective world itself is incoherent–“inconsistent.” Hegel sometimes puts his own claims in ways that invite such a reading.

Note Brandom's oscillation here, his uneasiness at accepting the conclusion that imposes itself – and one can well understand his oscillation. If “the objective world itself is incoherent – ‘inconsistent,’” this means that every vision of a more harmonious future society (inclusive of Brandom's own vision of the Third Phase) will give birth to new unpredictable dangers: “Looking forward, one sees the inevitable decay of each such beautiful harmony by the unavoidable advent of commitments incompatible with one another by their own lights” (664) – and this holds also for the promise, hidden in the Hegelian notion of Absolute Knowing, of a forthcoming social order of mutual recognition ... The stance of Absolute Knowing thus, at its most radical, compels us *not* to trust the future and to search even in the most promising projects of a better society for signs of inevitable decay.

## **The Alethic versus the Deontic**

Such a notion of AK also leaves behind the duality of what Brandom calls the alethic and the deontic, of the positive reality of causally interconnected facts and of the normative domain of reasoning – argumentative reasoning cannot be reduced to or explained by causal analysis of facts:

Suppose that the correct answer to the question of why we draw the distinction between right and wrong as we do in some area of discourse is a causal explanation in terms of economic class structure, or a quasi-biological account in terms of the limited number of ways the will to power can manifest itself in the weak, or a description of how early traumas which incurred out of the Family Romance recathect libido into standard repressed adult forms. If any such genealogy can causally explain why our normative attitudes have the contents that they do – why we make the judgments we do instead of some others – then the issue of the rational justifiability of those attitudes lapses. 542–543

Brandom rehearses here the standard argument against the three great post-Hegelian “hermeneuticians of suspicion” (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud), reducing them to cases of “base” approach: they all commit a naturalist

mistake by reducing the autonomy of Reason to an illusory effect of some non-normative causal process (the economic base, the will-to-power, the Unconscious). However, what if this is in some sense *true*? What if “alienation” is precisely the state in which I am motivated by causes that escape my reasoning, so that my reasoning is reduced to a secondary rationalization of stances really conditioned by non-transparent causes? So, what if the measure of “dis-alienation” is precisely to approach a state in which reasons *become* the causes of my attitudes?

But things are not as simple as that with the “hermeneuticians of suspicion.” For Marx, ideology is not an effect of objective causal mechanisms: the point of the “critique of ideology” is not just to reduce higher normative talk to lower motivations but to show how this talk is internally inconsistent, how its external dependence has to be reflected in its internal inconsistency, so that an ideology is not just externally determined but immanently false, haunted by its repressed spirits. With Freud it is similar: the Freudian “return of the repressed” is not an objective determination of our psychic life but an immanent inconsistency of our reasoning, unconscious causes are *reasons*, which are disavowed but continue to haunt us. (This “reflexive” status of the unconscious is especially clear in the case of the causal influence of early traumas: this influence is never directly linear but always retroactive, since it is the present subjective structure of the patient that over-determines which past events will count as traumas that will determine him/her.) So the question is: is there in Brandom’s edifice a place for the Freudian unconscious? Does he not reduce the Unconscious to an external pre-reflexive substantial determination?

Brandom rejects the reductionist claim that “norms and normative statuses are explanatorily otiose,” i.e., that they “are not to be found in the causal order as it is made visible by natural science, and (so) need never be appealed to in explanations of events that are in that order”: “There is no explanatory surplus gained by postulating, in addition to people’s adopting practical attitudes of taking or treating something as right or wrong, actual statuses of being right or wrong” (639). However, while already Freud doesn’t fit this reductionist explanatory model

(although some of his explanations may sound “reductionist”), Lacan’s insistence on the primacy of the symbolic “big Other,” his claim that psychoanalysis is not psychology, imply precisely that the normative “big Other” cannot be reduced to a result or an aspect of psychic processes. If one analyzes closely Freud’s notion of castration, it soon becomes clear that it does not refer to a psychic fact (fear or whatever) but to a minimal normativity: something that never was there ought to be there ... And, for Lacan, symbolic castration is constitutive of reality itself: it is not a fact, a positive feature of (physical or psychic) reality, it refers to a negative gesture of withdrawal (the loss of something that was never there, that is constituted only through being lost) – to put it in philosophical terms, symbolic castration is a transcendental fact, a key moment of the transcendental constitution of reality, an indication that something is out of joint if there is reality for us, i.e., to put it in Brandom’s traditional terms, that a normative deficiency is constitutive of our access to reality. That’s why Lacan determines the Unconscious as the “discourse of the Other”: symptoms as the formations of the Unconscious are at their most radical level not subject’s psychic pathological attitudes, which disturb his/her sense of reality and prevent his/her rational dealing with reality, they are rather the interventions of a non-psychic order into our psychic reality. For example, a symptom can articulate (give expression to) an unconscious norm (prohibition) of which the subject is not even aware. Enjoyment is not a natural drive, it is sustained by the superego-injunction “Enjoy!,” i.e., its status is normative. Therein resides the point of Lacan’s “Kant *avec* Sade”: Sade is the ultimate Kantian, the push toward unconstrained enjoyment discernible in his work is a version of the Kantian categorical imperative, an unconditional drive, which throws off the rails the natural cycle of the reproduction of life. This brings us back to the ultimate ontological limitation of Brandom’s theoretical edifice – he remains stuck onto the duality of alethic and deontic:

Modal relations of incompatibility and consequence have both alethic and deontic forms. They can be given both nomological and normative readings. These are the modalities that articulate the objective realm of being (reality, how things are in themselves) and the subjective realm of thought (appearance, how things are for consciousness, how they are taken to be), respectively. 642

But does Hegel's thought not move beyond (or, rather, beneath) this duality? Hegel, of course, doesn't reduce the deontic to positive reality; his basic notion of self-relating negativity rather introduces a proto-normative dimension into reality itself. The distinction between reality in itself and the way reality appears (to us – and thereby to itself) is inscribed into the very core of reality-in-itself. Hegel's problem is not how can we reach reality in itself but why (and how) does reality appear to itself and thereby get caught into illusions and imperfections that are part of reality itself – in short, Hegel's point is that our (epistemic) failure to grasp the noumenal dimension signals an imperfection of this noumenal dimension itself. The deontic dimension of human spirit is just the ultimate form of a "deontic" dimension of reality as such.

In his reading of the late Wittgenstein, Brandom gives a new semantic spin to Heidegger's notion of being-thrown (*Geworfenheit*): we always find ourselves thrown into a thick network of normative meanings and practices, which forms a contingent particular tradition, so that what we experience as the normative order we should follow is always tainted by contingency that cannot be grounded in universal rationality. There are four options with regard to this normative network, on the top of the simple premodern direct acceptance of tradition as factually true:

The first move in acquiring a minimal distance towards tradition is to accept our *Geworfenheit*, our being thrown into a contingent traditional set of norms and practices, as *unhintergebar* – even if we are well aware that there is no way for us to establish the truth status of this set. If and when this presupposed normative frame changes, this change is

not subjective free decision but Destiny (Heidegger) or epistemic shift of discourse (Foucault).

The next move is to presume that we can break out of the closed circle of *Geworfenheit* and gain access to some form of transcendental (or not) universal rationality: contingent tradition is not the ultimate horizon, it can be sublated in a universal rationality of binding norms. This is the wager of modern Enlightenment: progress is measured by the extent to which we reflexively overcome the fact of inherited tradition and recreate ourselves as agents of a universal rational order.

The next move is to accept that there is no such universal rational normative order. By doing this, we do not return to our *Geworfenheit* into a contingent network of tradition as the unsurpassable horizon of our being: what remains from the previous move is the autonomous subjective activity by means of which we can tear up the network of tradition. Since, however, this activity cannot arrive at a binding universal normative order, all that remains is this activity itself, and this brings us to postmodern historicist relativism: subjects playfully enact and subvert different normative systems, permanently re-constructing their normative network and re-inventing their identity. Figures of this stance reach from Romantic irony described by Hegel to some trends in today's LGBT+ ideology, which emphasize an ongoing re-invention of our gender identities.

In the final move, searching for the ground of this very contingent multiplicity, we return to a positive order of being that gives birth to what we misperceive as autonomous normativity – the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) tries to demonstrate that our normative structures are causally determined in a non-transparent way: economic base, will to power and resentment, unconscious.

Brandom, of course, rejects “hermeneutics of suspicion” as another mode of naturalist reductionism – but does the following passage from Hegel not point toward a non-reductionist reading of the Freudian Unconscious? “Consciousness, therefore, through its experience in which it should have found its truth, has really become a riddle to itself: the consequences of its deed are for it not the deeds themselves.”<sup>30</sup>



What psychoanalytic interpretation brings out is precisely how a subject's psychic life becomes "a riddle to itself," how its conscious intention is underpinned by an unconscious desire, which cannot be reduced to an agency of external fate or objective determination since the subject is still responsible for it – Freud mockingly remarked that, in contrast to religious confession, where you should tell everything you know, in psychoanalytic treatment you should confess (and thus admit you are responsible for) also what you don't know.

Psychoanalysis deals with subjective truth and its repression, not with how our subjective perception misses some objective reality. And an authentic critique of ideology does the same – for example, with regard to the difference between subjective and objective-factual truth: anti-Semitism is absolutely false even if it is (up to a point) factually true.

Rejecting "hermeneutics of suspicion," Brandom outlines his own Hegelian way to break out of the space of these four stances: to simplify things, he discards the last two and proposes a dialectical unity of the first two, a permanent and never-ending process in the course of which the contingent tradition we are thrown into is retroactively "sublated" into a rational order. His key properly Hegelian point is that "the contingent causes on which genealogical analyses show our discursive norms to be counterfactually conditioned are themselves features of prior applications of concepts"(635): we never step out of symbolic normativity into pure causal reality. Lacan outlines a different way out: alienation is overcome by its own redoubling, called by him "separation." Yes, we are always-already thrown into some contingent figuration of "big Other," and this alienated order cannot ever be "sublated" in a self-transparent reflexive rationality; but what we can do is to demonstrate how this big Other itself "doesn't exist"(Lacan), how it is already in itself inconsistent, traversed by immanent impossibilities and antagonisms – in short, how it is alienated from itself, or, to quote Hegel, how the secrets (for us) of the ancient Egyptians were already secrets for the Egyptians themselves, and it is this very crack in the Other that opens up the space of freedom to us. Or, in Brandom's terms, norms cannot be reduced to facts because the level of facts (factual reality) is already in itself traversed by an

impossibility and thus implies a proto-normativity. Hegel is *not* a normative thinker but a thinker of positive order, which is in itself thwarted by impossibility and in this sense implying a normativity.

## **What is Absolute in Absolute Knowing**

Many of us remember the famous conclusion of the students' situationist manifesto from 1966: "*Vivre sans temps mort, jouir sans entraves*" – to live without dead time, to enjoy without obstacles. If Freud and Lacan taught us anything, it is that this formula – the supreme case of a superego injunction since, as Lacan aptly demonstrated, superego is at its most basic a positive injunction to enjoy, not a negative act of prohibiting something – is a recipe for disaster: the urge to fill in every moment of the time allotted to us with intense engagement unavoidably ends up in a suffocating monotony. Dead time – moments of withdrawal, of what old mystics called *Gelassenheit* – are crucial for the revitalization of our life experience. And the same holds for obstacles: how to enjoy unhindered when obstacles (and their eventual overcoming or playing with and around them) are a central component of enjoyment? We don't just enjoy overcoming obstacles, we often enjoy obstacles as such, precisely when they hinder the direct access to some pleasure – therein resides the basic reversal enacted by obsessional rituals: the patient joyfully enacts gestures of punishment for a prohibited desire, so that the renunciation of desire turns to desire for renunciation. This reversal is the basic form of the *reflexivity* of the Freudian unconscious. Brandom has to miss this reflexivity, he has to reduce the Freudian Unconscious to an objective determination, because for him, Absolute Knowing is an ideal positive order that awaits us beyond the path of mistakes. For Sebastian Rödl, in his extreme form of inverted Hegelianism, Absolute Knowing as the space beyond mistakes is for this very reason a knowing about nothing – the "nothing" AK is about is precisely the "nothing" beyond or beneath the curved space of antagonisms. There is no substantial One, the Truth that expresses itself in and through these antagonisms, as Spinoza thought.

So how does Rödl fare with the Unconscious? In *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity*,<sup>31</sup> he deploys the immanent structure of self-consciousness at its purest. One cannot but admire Rödl's uncompromising radicality, which is thoroughly opposed to the predominant historicist relativism: one cannot even say that Rödl advocates Absolute Idealism, he simply and directly asserts it as the only coherent form that philosophy can take – his book “propounds no theses, advances no hypotheses, does not recommend a view or position /.../ As it aims to express the comprehension of judgment that is contained in any judgment, the present essay can say only what anyone already knows, knows in any judgment, knows insofar as she judges at all.”<sup>32</sup> Or, as a perspicuous comment on his book puts it, “Rödl seeks not to convince us of anything, it seems, because we *already* know – in some inchoate sense – what he sets out.”<sup>33</sup> Before we laugh at this arrogance, we should remind ourselves that all authentic philosophy is doing exactly the same thing. The next feature that may surprise us is the total lack of any historical reflexion, of the dialectical idea of error as a path to truth: Rödl directly presents his position that “absolute knowledge is nothing other than empirical knowledge and empirical knowledge nothing other than absolute knowledge.”<sup>34</sup>

To clarify this position, which, according to Rödl, simply has no contrary because it is the only possible consistent position, the best way is nonetheless to begin with its contrary, the position Rödl is attacking as inconsistent: the standard realist view, which holds that “reality is wholly external to thought, and that the role of judgment is to bring us as knowers incrementally closer to this simply given independent world. On this view, we start with our merely subjective perceptions and gradually work our way toward an objective grasp of external reality.” In this view, objective reality and our self-consciousness are the two opposed poles of the process of knowledge: our knowledge is articulated in judgments, and each of the two poles contributes something to the structure of judgment. The content of a judgment is objective (“I am sitting on a chair” relates to an objective fact), while the judging subject contributes the propositional attitude

toward this content, the attitude that reflects the state of the self-conscious subject (say, I am thereby declaring that I am sitting on a chair, or I am mocking this fact). Rödl entirely rejects this distinction: a judgment contains *within* it the recognition of its own validity: “the self-consciousness of judgment entails its objectivity: as judging that things are so is thinking it valid that they are, the validity of a judgment can depend on nothing that one does not apprehend *in* this very judgment.”<sup>35</sup> Or, to quote our commentator again, “in a judgment, one does not entertain some propositional content, and then adopt an attitude toward it; instead, the judgment includes inside it a self-conscious recognition of its own valid thought.”<sup>36</sup> There is no consciousness (about something objective) without self-consciousness: asserting some objective content in a judgment is only possible if this assertion is self-consciously assumed as my judgment. The fact is that judgment is self-conscious, thus cannot be coherently denied, since this is a feature of *all* judgment, and the science of judgment is “without contrary” because its opposite cannot even be formulated. What this means is also that the study of judgment is not just one branch of inquiry among others: “the science of judgment – knowledge of the nature of judgment – is at the same time the science of the object of judgment – knowledge of the nature of the object of judgment. And the object of judging is everything.”<sup>37</sup> The echoes of Kant’s formula “The conditions of the possibility of experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience” are unmistakable here, but without the distinction between objects of phenomenal experience and noumenal Things-in-themselves. Therein resides Rödl’s Absolute Idealism: “to know what judgment is also involves knowledge of what judgment is about: illimitable reality. Because the science of judgment is without contrary, it needs no validation, but there are also judgments with contrary – empirical – claims that require justification.

Now we have arrived at the philosophically most interesting part of Rödl’s thought: far from ignoring contingent claims, which depend on empirical verification, but also far from conceiving absolute knowledge

as something that relates to a separated elevated sphere of eternal truths, Rödl asserts that “absolute knowledge is nothing other than the thought of the validity of empirical judgment”:<sup>38</sup> “absolute knowledge is nothing other than the self-determining progression of the judgment of experience.”<sup>39</sup> In short, absolute knowledge (knowledge without contrary) is nothing but the formal structure of gaining empirical knowledge, something on which we unconditionally rely in our search into reality. Rödl thus, in some sense, nonetheless remains a Kantian, he admits the gap between the two levels, the unconditional (absolute) and the conditional (empirical); however, he doesn’t interpret this gap as the one between a formal a priori (immanent to our subjectivity) and contingent empirical content (that comes from outside): there is no such gap – of course we can make errors in empirical judgments, but these judgments are not by a reference to some reality external to judgments. *All* content of judgments is already “structured like a judgment,” i.e., precisely to count as a counter-argument to an empirically wrong judgment, it treats the reality that falsifies a wrong judgment as judgmental in its form. Again, all our assertion of objective reality is possible only in the form of judgmental self-consciousness.

To recapitulate, “in a judgment, one does not entertain some propositional content, and then adopt an attitude toward it; instead, the judgment includes inside it a self-conscious recognition of its own valid thought” – or, as Irad Kimhi put it:

[T]here is no gap between one’s judging something (p) and one’s assessment of the same judgment as true (“I am truly judging p”). The transition from a judgment to a truth-assessment of that judgment is not based on a recognition of any new fact. A proper philosophical account of this matter must allow us to say that the assessment of one’s judgment as true is internal to the very act of judging.”<sup>40</sup>

Or, as Robert Hanna recapitulated Kimhi’s reasoning:

since for Kimhi, truth-assessment is internal to the act of judging, then *the less true* (= non-true = false) a judgement is, *the less it is a determinate, real judgement*. In other words, for Kimhi, falsity-as-the-privation-of-truth is also falsity-as-the-privation-of-judgement; so falling short of the truth is thereby *falling short of being a determinate, real judgement*; and therefore falsity is *logically indeterminate and unreal*. For Kimhi, then, only *one* truth-value is determinate and real, namely truth or The True.<sup>[41](#)</sup>

We should accept Kimhi's claim that there are no false judgments: false judgments are simply not judgments in the full sense of the term. But the Hegelian conclusion we should draw from this is: there are no determinate, real judgments, i.e., there are no judgments fully fitting their notion, so that the whole space of judgments circulates around its own impossibility.

Nonetheless, the greatest mistake here would have been to dismiss Rödl's (and Kimhi's) radical position as a case of philosophical madness: he is fully right in his claim that what he is describing is simply the implicit structure of our empirical knowledge. We are *never* in a position to as it were step outside ourselves and compare our subjective view with external reality. Is then there a way to undermine Rödl's position in an immanent way, without recourse to naive realism? One should definitely remain within the confines of what Rödl calls "Absolute Idealism" and, within this space, enact a move from Rödl's radicalized Kantianism to Hegel – how? What if we endorse the relative, inconsistent/incoherent, nature of our knowledge, but not in the sense that it imperfectly reflects external reality. What if, while maintaining the absolute-idealist motif of the total mediation (or, as Hegel would have put it, speculative identity) of subjective and objective (epistemological and ontological) levels, we transpose this inconsistency into reality itself, so that it is in the very cracks and inconsistencies of our knowledge that we touch the Real (as Lacan would have put it)?

We should thus turn around the standard opposition of objective reality and its distortion in subjective perception. Every vision of "objective

reality” is already subjectively constituted (or, as Lacan put it, fantasy is the ultimate support of reality), and the Real of what doesn’t fit this fantasy-construct of objective reality is discernible precisely and only in the excess of subjectivity. It is in this sense that subject and object are identical (again, in a Hegelian speculative way): postmodern relativists claim that there is an excess of the Real that is “too strong” for us, which cannot be integrated into our symbolic universe – yes, but this traumatic excess that doesn’t fit into “objective reality” is ultimately subject itself. Psychoanalysts often claim that every subject is marked by some trauma and forms itself in defense against it – but what if we accomplish here a reflexive turn from traumatized subject to subject itself as trauma? Is subject not some kind of crack in the texture of reality, an X that cannot ever be adequately objectivized, located into reality? Mystics (and German Idealists) knew this very well when they referred to the core of subjectivity as the “night of the world,” to the vanishing point at which reality collapses. Rödl ignores this negative dimension constitutive of subjectivity, a dimension that has to occur before subject can function as a self-consciousness that sustains a judgment.

And the same goes for the gap that separates the content of a judgment from the propositional attitude that sustains it. It is not that content is “objective,” while the accompanying propositional attitude expresses how the subject relates to this content. On the contrary, content is subjectively constituted, while the Real inscribes itself into the dissonance with regard to content introduced by propositional attitude. Let’s take an oft-repeated example. Lacan wrote that, even if what a jealous husband claims about his wife (that she sleeps around with other men) is all true, his jealousy is still pathological: the pathological element is the husband’s need for jealousy as the only way to retain his dignity, identity even. Along the same lines, one could say that, even if most of the Nazi claims about the Jews were true (they exploit Germans, they seduce German girls ...) – which they are not, of course –, their anti-Semitism would still be (and was) a pathological phenomenon because it repressed the true reason why the Nazis needed anti-Semitism in order to sustain their ideological position. In

the Nazi vision, their society is an organic Whole of harmonious collaboration, so an external intruder is needed to account for divisions and antagonisms.

So, in Rödl's terms, what makes fake news fake is not the non-truth of the content but the false propositional attitude that sustains it. To put it in Freudian terms, propositional attitude can also function as the unconscious moment of reflection that undermines its content. So, insofar as the key feature of self-consciousness is self-reflexivity, we should paraphrase here Lacan's famous thesis that the unconscious is structured like a language: "the unconscious is structured like a self-consciousness." And what this means is that there is already in the Unconscious a "normative" dimension at work.

To recapitulate, the Kantian limit of Brandom's (and Pippin's) reading of Hegel is that they both posit the distinction between ontic and normative levels, between (the nexus of) causes which connect objects and (the nexus of) reasons which make us, free agents, do something, act in a certain way, between the alethic dimension (facts of reality) and the deontic dimension, as insurmountable. (Brandom and Pippin formally admit that humanity (and with it free self-conscious agents) somehow emerged out of nature, but they dismiss this fact as irrelevant for philosophy).<sup>42</sup> However, this distinction is not the ultimate fact for Hegel: when Hegel says that truth is not just *adequatio* of our concepts to things to which they relate but, at a more basic level, *adequatio* of a thing to its concept, he thereby introduces a deontic dimension into reality itself. When – Hegel's own example – we say "this is a true table," we introduce a tension between what an object factually is and what it should be into its reality itself.

To clarify the mediation of notions and reality, let's turn again to psychoanalysis: although a certain category in psychoanalysis is theoretically wrong (say, "pathological Narcissus"), there can be individuals who live and enact this category – in short, who *are* "pathological Narcissists." In the same vein, symptoms and theory are mediated: Jung is wrong but there are patients with "Jungian symptoms," etc. If reality follows (or refers to) a wrong concept, this



reality can be wrong in itself, so it's not just that concepts more or less faithfully "mirror" reality – reality itself is "mediated" by concepts. The same goes for politics: the fascist notion of the organic unity of a nation is false, it obfuscates immanent antagonisms, but this falsity can get embodied in a large political movement, which is part of social reality. Or, liberal individualism is "wrong" as a theory of what society is, but this "mistake" can be realized in liberal societies. The same goes for political economy: what Marx called "commodity fetishism" is an ideological mystification, which structures economic reality itself.

The same goes for love: the ecstatic-Romantic notion of love as the fusion of the two (lovers) into One is wrong, but, again, is a mistake that can be intensely experienced as lived. The same goes for art: although many notions of what art is are clearly "wrong" (one can easily show where Romanticism or naturalism are wrong), these notions get actualized in great works of art ... In a true Hegelian spirit, one should even take a step further here and claim that there are realities that can only exist insofar as they incorporate/actualize a wrong notion. Consequently, to understand how this paradox of reality as the embodiment of an epistemological mistake can function, we have to take into account the fact that "mistakes" (ideological misperceptions) do not (wrongly) "reflect" social reality: they are inscribed into social reality itself, they sustain social practices and institutions.

## **“Ungeschehenmachen”**

In the same vein, abstraction is not a vague conceptual frame at a distance from the wealth of reality: the key Hegelian notion of "concrete universality" means that abstraction is part of reality itself, that the tension between abstraction and empirical wealth is part of reality. Let's take a very problematic example of racial clichés: "Slovenes (or Scots) are misers" is definitely not true for the majority of Slovenes (or Scots), but insofar as this universal claim is for-itself, (the majority of) Slovenes who are not misers react to it – say, they act generously in order not to appear misers, etc. This is what concrete universality means – the tension or gap that seems to separate reality from our

notion of it is inscribed into reality itself, and this is what Brandom seems to miss in his critique of “naturalistic reductionism” which,

in the form of commitment to an explanatory framework that eliminates reference to norms entirely, in favor of attitudes, is a principal expression of the alienation of the modern world. Hegel’s account of the nature of the expressively progressive development he can envisage, by which the modern alienated structure of self-conscious subjectivity and social substance can give rise to a new, better structure, which overcomes alienation, and so re-achieves *Sittlichkeit*, while retaining the advance in self-conscious subjectivity characteristic of modernity and accordingly encompasses a nonreductive account of how we should understand the place of norms in the natural world. The aim of the rest of this book is tell that story. 483

A paradox immediately strikes the eye here: subjectivist explanation of norms as grounded in the agents’ attitudes is “naturalistic reductionism,” while insisting on the objective value of norms independently of their subjective mediation is anti-naturalistic. But this paradox is grounded in the thing itself: if we prioritize subjective attitudes and practices, this subjective activity becomes a positive quasi-natural process, a thing that “really goes on” (in the Althusserian sense of ideological practices and rituals) – as Badiou saw very clearly, agents are only true subjects if they are subjects of a Cause that in some sense transcends them, the Cause for which they are engaged. To grasp properly the problem Brandom is dealing with here, let’s just think about how an engaged collective deals with Cause that motivates them – let’s imagine a group of dedicated Communists. The Communist Cause, of course, only exists insofar as there are individuals who fight for it; it is alive only in the attitudes and activities of the engaged individuals. However, this Cause is simultaneously the Cause that motivates them, the Thing for which they are ready to sacrifice everything. Again, the paradox is that the more “subjectivist” the movement animated by a Cause is, the more “reified” the Cause gets; i.e., the more subjects perceive themselves as mere instruments of their Cause: Stalinism was radically “subjectivist”; the Party considered itself

as a subject deciding the course of action, but this subjectivism expressed itself in radical selfinstrumentalization (“we Communists are just instruments of the historical necessity to actualize our Cause”). While Brandom clearly articulates these tensions, he sees them as signs of the fact that we are dealing with the “still-incomplete project of modernity”:

recollectively understanding modernity is the proper way to realize where we are committed to going from here: what would count as further progress. Nonetheless, Hegel resolutely keeps the narrative center of attention focused on the promises and perils of the still-incomplete project of modernity. 485

Really? Are we back at Habermas’ motif of modernity as an unfinished project? Brandom claims about the finale of the chapter on Spirit: “Unlike the earlier stories, this one outlines something that has not happened yet: a future development of Spirit, of which Hegel is the prophet: the making explicit of something already implicit, whose occurrence is to usher in the next phase in our history” (564). Was Hegel really such a prophet? The key word in the above-quoted passage is “nonetheless” – why “nonetheless”? As if Hegel should have gone on to speculate about “new practices and institutions /.../ required to overcome the structural alienation of modern life” but instead remained stuck with “the promises and perils of the still-incomplete project of modernity”? But what if Hegel had good reasons not to progress further? Rebecca Comay (in *Mourning Sickness*) convincingly demonstrated that the reversal of absolute freedom into terror is a traumatic point from which the narrative of *Phenomenology* never really recuperates: in the next chapter we move into internalized Kantian morality. Hegel is unable to go on and imagine further progress in the direction of the historico-political real: after the catastrophe of the French Revolution, what we get in *Phenomenology* is Kantian morality, religion, and philosophy (Absolute Knowing). Furthermore, how does the social system of the corporate state described in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* stand with respect to “new practices and institutions /.../ required to overcome the structural alienation of modern life”? If we read it the way Hegel himself enjoins us to do, as a

portrait drawn “gray on gray” of the rational structure of an order whose proper time has already passed, does this not imply that we have to (re)introduce into Hegel’s thought a very traditional divide between the socio-political limitation of Hegel’s thought and the potential for a more progressive vision of society implied by the basic conceptual structure of his thought, what Brandom calls “Stage Three” (the synthesis between subjectivity and *Sittlichkeit*)?

Brandom mobilizes here the standard Hegelian opposition of Understanding and Reason: for Understanding, one has to make a choice here – either the universe of norms (our ethical substance) is grounded in subjective attitudes and practices, or these attitudes and practices presuppose (and are grounded in) some already-given ethical substance; only Reason can think the mutual co-dependence of these two moments ... While this is in principle true, the question remains how exactly to think this co-dependence. That is to say, it is clear that the abstract formula of mutual dependence is not sufficient: the relationship between the two levels (substance and subjective activity) is clearly not symmetrical. Althusser proposed here the standard Marxist formula: the very gesture of recognizing oneself in a Cause creates this Cause (and the subject). But why is the illusory substantialization of a Cause necessary?

To get this, we should return to the Hegelian motif of the passage from Understanding to Reason, but in a way different from Brandom’s: this passage doesn’t occur when the hierarchical order is simply changed into mutual implication or dependence, but when this order is reflected-into-itself so that what stands lower in the global hierarchy gets inverted. Let’s take Hegel’s own example of the relationship between religion and state: in the terms of the Absolute, religion is, of course, higher than state; however, within the domain of the state, religion (as a social force) should be subordinated to the state’s regulations. This is also Creon’s point against Antigone: yes, she is right in the terms of the Absolute; however, within the public domain regulated by state, the display of religious rituals should be subordinated to state. The same holds for the relationship between love and political Cause or Duty – love, precisely as the Absolute, should not

be posited as a direct goal, it should retain the status of a by-product, of something we get as an undeserved grace. Perhaps, there is no greater love than that of a revolutionary couple, where each of the two lovers is ready to abandon the other at any moment if revolution demands it. So, again, love is Absolute, but within the public domain it should be subordinated to a Cause ... And, last but not least, the same holds for the relationship between subjects' practices and attitudes and the Cause that motivates them: ultimately the attitudes and practices give life to a Cause, but when this Cause is alive it is experienced as the ground that gives life to our attitudes and practices.

Brandom correctly formulates the key problem: how to think the status of the "big Other" as, simultaneously, dependent on subjectivity and valid "objectively" as the substance of subjective activity? In his solution, Hegel unites radical opposites – near the end of the *Encyclopedic Logic*, he says: "The good, the absolute good, brings itself to completion in the world eternally, and the result is that it is already brought to completion in and for itself, without needing first to wait for us." This means precisely that, in some sense, reconciliation has always-already happened – the illusion is that reconciliation did not already happen, but this illusion is necessary since it propels subjects to incessant activity through which the Absolute "brings itself to completion." This is what Hegel says in the quoted "problematic" passage, but here interpretive problems begin. If we read this passage in a simple and direct way, it amounts to the strongest possible assertion of the Absolute as a self-sufficient Substance and not also a subject. In contrast to this reading, one should insist that the "problematic" passage is the only way to consistently formulate the idea of the Absolute not only as substance but also as subject. The solution is not to conceive the historical process as open, with everything depending on us, free subjects, and every objective determination a reified objectivization of our own creativity; it is also not a "balanced" combination of substantial fate and the limited space of free subjective creativity, in the sense of the famous lines from the beginning of Marx's *18th Brumaire*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but

under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” It is not that historical necessity provided the basic frame within which we can act freely (in the sense of Engels’ notion of historical necessity, which realizes itself through a complex network of individual contingencies). There is Fate, our future is predetermined, the Absolute “is already brought to completion in and for itself, without needing first to wait for us,” but this very completion is our own contingent act. What this means is that we should turn around the famous lines from Marx’s *18th Brumaire*: our acts are predetermined by circumstances, there is no freedom in what we do, but we have the freedom to change these circumstances, to select the frame that determines what we do.

In short, the paradox is that the only way to assert the possibility of a radical change through subjective intervention is to accept Predestination and Fate. Historical process is thus characterized by the overlapping of necessity and contingency, the overlapping that was first explicitly formulated in the Protestant idea of predestination. It’s not that a deeper necessity realizes itself through a complex set of contingent circumstances, it’s that contingent circumstances decide the fate of necessity itself: once a thing (contingently) happens, its occurrence retroactively becomes necessary. Our fate is not yet decided – not in the simple sense that we have a choice, but in a more radical sense of choosing one’s fate itself. Which, then, is the exact status of the big Other which is, to use Hegel’s wordplay, presup-posed, retroactively posited as the presupposition of our activity?

In his *The Mark of the Sacred*,<sup>[43](#)</sup> Jean-Pierre Dupuy explores the origins of what Lacan calls the “big Other,” what Hegel called “externalization /*Entäußerung*/,” what Marx called “alienation,” and – why not – what Friedrich Hayek called “self-transcendence”: how can, out of the interaction of individuals, the appearance of an “objective order,” which cannot be reduced to their interaction, but is experienced by them as a substantial agency that determines their lives, arise? It is all too easy to “unmask” such a substance, to show, by means of a phenomenological genesis, how it gradually gets “reified” and is sedimented out of individuals’ interaction: the problem is that the presupposition of such

a spectral/virtual substance is in a way co-substantial with being-human – those who are unable to relate to it as such, those who directly subjectivize it, are called psychotics (it is for psychotics that, behind every impersonal big Other, there is a personal big Other, the paranoiac's secret agent/master who pulls the strings).

Dupuy's great theoretical breakthrough is to link this emergence of the "big Other" to social hierarchy, but not just in the simple sense that a stable hierarchic order has to be supported by some figure of the transcendent big Other). It is here that the first properly *dialectical* twist in Dupuy's line of argumentation occurs: relying on Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus*, he deploys how hierarchy implies not only a hierarchic order, but also its immanent loop/reversal: true, the social space is divided into higher and lower hierarchical levels, but *within the lower level, the lower is higher than the higher*. An exemplary is provided by the relationship between Church and State in Christianity: in principle, of course, Church is above State; however, as thinkers from Augustine to Hegel made clear, *within the secular order of the State, State is above Church* (i.e., Church as a social institution should be subordinated to State) – if it is not, if the Church wants directly to rule also as a secular power, then it becomes unavoidably corrupted from within, reducing itself to just another secular power, using its religious teaching as the ideology to justify its secular rule.

Dupuy's next, even more crucial, move is to formulate this twist in the logic of hierarchy, which is the immanent condition of its functioning in the terms of the negative self-relationship between the universal and the particular, between the All and its parts, i.e., of a process in the course of which the universal encounters itself among its species in the guise of its "oppositional determination." Back to the example of Church and State, Church is the encompassing unity of all human lives, standing for its highest authority and conferring on all its parts their proper place in the great hierarchical order of the universe; however, it encounters itself as a subordinate element of the terrestrial state power, which is in principle subordinated to it: Church as a social institution is protected by and has to obey the laws of the state. Insofar as the higher and the lower also relate here as the Good and the Evil

(the good divine domain versus the terrestrial sphere of power struggles, egotistic interests, search for pleasures, etc.), one can also say that, through this loop or twist immanent to hierarchy, the “higher” Good dominates, controls, and uses the “lower” Evil: even if it may appear, superficially (i.e., to a gaze constrained by the terrestrial perspective of reality as the domain of egotistic power struggles and search for vain pleasures), that, with its pretense to a “higher” place, religion is just an ideological legitimization of the “lower” interests (say, that Church ultimately just legitimizes social hierarchical relations), religion secretly pulls the strings, it remains the hidden power that allows and mobilizes Evil for the larger Good. One is almost tempted to use here the term “over-determination”: although it is the secular power that immediately plays the determining role, this determining role is itself over-determined by the religious/sacred All. (Of course, for the partisan of the “critique of ideology,” this very notion that religion secretly dominates social life, i.e., that there is a secret power that gently controls and steers the chaotic struggle of social life, is an ideological illusion *par excellence* ...) How are we to read this complex self-relating entwinement of the “higher” and the “lower”? There are two main versions, which perfectly fit the opposition between idealism and materialism:

1. the traditional theological-(pseudo-)Hegelian matrix of containing the *pharmakon*: the higher all-embracing All allows the lower Evil, but contains it, makes it serve the higher goal. There are many figures of this matrix: the (pseudo-)Hegelian “Cunning of Reason” (Reason is the unity of itself and particular passions, it mobilizes particular egotist passions to achieve its secret goal of universal rationality); Marx’s historical process in which violence serves progress; the “invisible hand” of the market, which mobilizes individual egotisms for the common good ...
2. a more radical (and truly Hegelian) notion of Evil distinguishes itself from itself by way of externalizing itself in a transcendent figure of the Good. From this perspective, far from encompassing Evil as its subordinated moment, the difference between Good and Evil is inherent to Evil, Good is nothing but universalized Evil, Evil is



itself the unity of itself and Good. Evil controls/contains itself by way of generating a specter of transcendent Good; however, it can only do it by way of superseding its “ordinary” mode of Evil by an infinitized/absolutized Evil.

This is why the self-containing of Evil through the positing of some transcendent power that limits it can always explode; this is why Hegel has to admit an excess of negativity, which always threatens to disturb the rational order. All the talk about the “materialist reversal” of Hegel, about the tension between the “idealist” and the “materialist” Hegel, is pointless if it is not grounded in this precise topic of two opposed and conflicting ways to read the negative self-relating of universality.

This self-reflected inversion of hierarchy is what distinguishes Reason from Understanding: while the ideal of Understanding is a simple clearly articulated hierarchy, Reason supplements it with the inversion on account of which, as Dupuy put it, within the lower level of a hierarchy, the lower stands higher than the higher. Priests (or philosophers) stand higher than brutal secular power but, within the domain of power, they are subordinated to it – the gap of separation that allows for this reversal is crucial for the functioning of power, which is why the Platonic dream of unifying the two aspects in the figure of a philosopher-king (realized only with Stalin) has to fail miserably. (One can, of course, argue that the higher status of the priest is only an ideological illusion tolerated by warriors to legitimize their actual power, but this illusion is nonetheless necessary, a key feature of the charisma of power.) The same can also be put in the terms of the metaphor of evil as a stain on the picture: if, from traditional teleology, evil is a stain legitimized by the overall harmony, contributing to it, then, from a materialist standpoint, the good itself is a self-organization/self-limitation of stains, the result of a limit, a “minimal difference,” within the field of evil. This is why moments of crisis are so dangerous – in them, the obscure obverse of the transcendent Good, the “dark side of God,” the violence that sustains the very containment of violence, appears as such:

One believed that the good rules over the evil, its “opposite,” but it appears now that it is rather the evil which rules over itself by way of assuming a distance towards itself, by way of positing itself outside itself; thus “self-externalized,” the superior level appears as good.<sup>44</sup>

Dupuy’s point is that the sacred is, as to its content, the same as the terrible/evil; their difference is purely formal/structural – what makes it “sacred” is its exorbitant character, which makes it a limitation of “ordinary” evil. To see this, we should not only focus on religious prohibitions and obligations, but also bear in mind the rituals practiced by a religion, and the contradiction, already noted by Hegel, between prohibitions and rituals: “Often, the ritual consists in staging the violation of these prohibitions and violations”(143). Let’s take a (perhaps surprising) example of Dupuy’s claim that the Sacred is the disgusting criminal evil itself, which just gets displaced onto the empty place of the Sacred: Rammstein’s ode to Moscow, “the most beautiful city in the world” – here is the first half of the lyrics:

This city is a whore / she has red spots on her forehead / her teeth are made of gold / she is fat and yet so lovely / her mouth falls to my valley / when I pay her for it / she takes off her clothes but only for money / the city that keeps me in suspense /CHORUS GIRLS:/ Moscow, one two three / Moscow, look at it / pioneers are walking around there, singing songs to Lenin.

There is no cynical irony in this description of Moscow as an ugly old whore with red spots and false teeth, etc. – one should read it in continuity with the chorus lines, which portray an everyday idyllic scene from the Soviet Moscow (a group of pioneers marching and singing a song dedicated to Lenin). Here again, parallax is irreducible: only against the background of its obscene ugliness does Moscow regain its sacred status. And it is only against this background of an irreducible parallax that we can properly understand Hegel’s most radical speculative statement on the power of Spirit to undo the past:

Spirit, in the absolute certainty of itself, is lord and master over every deed and actuality, and can cast them off, and make them as if they had never happened.<sup>45</sup>

The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind. The deed is not imperishable; it is taken back by Spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality present in it, whether as intention or as an existent negativity and limitation, straightway vanishes.<sup>46</sup>

Hegel's radical claim about the power of Spirit is that it can make our deeds "as if they had never happened" – "The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind" – is nowhere better exemplified than in the case of love. Just imagine all the pain, the violent verbal outbursts and misunderstandings that accompany a truly passionate love. Love does not triumph in the sense that it leaves behind these painful explosions and ends in pure bliss; love triumphs when the lovers become aware that such explosions are in themselves a proof of the authenticity of their love – without them, there wouldn't be love but just a placid flirting. But we are not talking here just about secondary misunderstandings and conflicts, which are parts of love: love is in itself a traumatic wound, something that disturbs the placid rhythm of our daily life, but it is simultaneously that which can heal the wound, making us blissfully happy – only love can heal the wound of love if the loving couple succeeds in inventing a formula for structuring their daily life. Love is thus a pure contradiction: a peaceful bliss, which actualizes itself as a brutal and violent passion, or a brutal passion, which generates moments of breath-taking tenderness. In a homologous way, love is a contradiction on oneness and the abyss of radical otherness: "The beloved is not opposed to us, he is one with our own being; we see us only in him, but then again he is not a we any more – a riddle, a miracle [*ein Wunder*], one that we cannot grasp."<sup>47</sup> It is crucial not to read these two claims as opposed, as if the beloved is partially a "we," part of myself, and partially a riddle: the miracle of love is that you are part of my identity precisely insofar as you remain a miracle that I cannot grasp.

But how, exactly, are we to read Brandom's notion of recollective forgiving as *Ungeschehenmachen*, as retroactive undoing? The Spirit can make past deeds "as if they had never happened" – what does this "as if" amount to? The main trap to be avoided here is the one of holistic teleology: something that appears to us as horror can be, from a larger perspective, an element that contributes to global harmony, in the same way that a tiny stain in a large painting contributes to its beauty, if we look at the painting from a proper distance ... The legacy of Job prohibits us from such a gesture of taking a refuge in the standard transcendent figure of God as a secret Master, who knows the meaning of what appears to us as a meaningless catastrophe, the God who sees the entire picture in which what we perceive as a stain contributes to global harmony. When confronted with an event like the Holocaust, or the death of millions in the Congo in the last years, is it not obscene to claim that these stains have a deeper meaning in that they contribute to the harmony of the Whole? Is there a Whole that can teleologically justify and thus redeem/sublate an event like the Holocaust? Christ's death on the cross thus means that one should drop without restraint the notion of God as a transcendent caretaker who guarantees the happy outcome of our acts, the guarantee of historical teleology – Christ's death on the cross is the death of *this* God, it repeats Job's stance, it refuses any "deeper meaning" that obfuscates the brutal real of historical catastrophes. Even a strong version of this logic – forgiving does not mean the sacrifice/erasure of the particular content but the recognition that a particular content is necessary for the actualization of the universal Good – is not strong enough: recollective forgiving remains an ambiguous notion. In the ethical sphere, it can be read as "trying to understand what appears to us as evil," reconstructing a hidden positive motivation, which just got expressed in a perverted way. However, retroactivity implies a much more radical dimension of contingency – things are not what they are, they "will have been," their truth is decided retroactively:

Concrete practical forgiveness involves doing things to change what the consequences of the act turn out to be. For example, one might trust one's successors to make it the case that one's inadvertent revelation, one's sacrifice, or the decision to go to war was worthwhile, because of what it eventually led to – because of what we made of it by doing things differently afterward. Something I have done should not be treated as an error or a crime, as the hard-hearted *niederträchtig* judge does, because it is not yet settled what I have done. Subsequent actions by others can affect its consequences, and hence the content of what I have done. 602

At the level of immediate facts, things are what they are – in the Holocaust millions died, nothing can retroactively change this; the past can only be changed at the level of its symbolic mediation. But here, things get complicated: what about the opposite case (evoked by Hegel himself): an agent acts with best intentions but unpredictable consequences of this act are catastrophic – how does recollective forgiving work here? Can the judge construct a partial forgiving by way of proving that the most probable consequence would have been benevolent and that the catastrophe was due to a contingent unpredictable accident? And what if we introduce a third level on the top of the duality of my subjective intention in performing an act and the actual outcome of my act: the unconscious motivations? This third level should in no way be limited to “base” motifs as the concealed truth of the publicly professed “noble” motifs (a person who claims to perform an act out of the sense of duty was effectively motivated by personal revenge) – it should also include the opposite case (while I thought I acted out of some private “pathological” inclination, a deeper sense of justice actually motivated me).

So how, exactly, should we read Hegel's claim that Spirit can retroactively undo the crime, heal the wound, make it not happen? This brings us back to Wagner's *“Die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur der Sie schlug”* – Hegel says the same thing, although with the accent shifted in the opposite direction: the Spirit is itself the wound it tries to heal, i.e., the wound is self-inflicted. That is to say, what is “Spirit” at its most elementary? The “wound” of nature: subject is the immense – absolute

– power of negativity, of introducing a gap/cut into the given-immediate substantial unity, the power of differentiating, of “abstracting,” of tearing apart and treating as self-standing what in reality is part of an organic unity. This is why the notion of the “self-alienation” of Spirit (of Spirit losing itself in its otherness, in its objectivization, in its result) is more paradoxical than it may appear: it should be read together with Hegel’s assertion of the thoroughly non-substantial character of Spirit: there is no *res cogitans*, no thing which (as its property) also thinks; spirit is nothing but the process of overcoming natural immediacy, of the cultivation of this immediacy, of withdrawing-into-itself or “taking off” from it, of – why not – alienating itself from it.

This is why Hegel’s notion of subjectivity is incompatible with every version of Aristotelian notion of substance, like the one found in young Marx, who wrote in *Manuscripts 1844* that “whenever real, corporeal man, man with his feet firmly on the solid ground, man exhaling and inhaling all the forces of nature, posits his real, objective essential powers as alien objects by his externalization [*Entäußerung*], it is not the act of positing that is the subject in this process: it is the subjectivity of objective essential powers, whose action, therefore, must also be something objective.”<sup>48</sup> This is the Aristotelian Marx at his worst: he denies the proper dimension of subjectivity by way of reducing it to an expression of “objective essential powers.”

The paradox is thus that there is no Self that precedes the Spirit’s “self-alienation”: the very process of alienation creates/generates the “Self” from which Spirit is alienated and to which it then returns. (Hegel here turns around the standard notion that a failed version of X presupposes this X as their norm (measure): X is created, its space is outlined, only through repetitive failures to reach it.) Spirit’s self-alienation is the same as, fully coincides with, its alienation from its Other (nature), because it constitutes itself through its “return-to-itself” from its immersion into natural Otherness. In other words, Spirit’s return-to-itself creates the very dimension to which it returns. (This holds for all “return to origins”: when, from the nineteenth century onwards, new

Nation-States were constituting themselves in Central and Eastern Europe, their discovery and return to “old ethnic roots” generated these roots.) What this means is that the “negation of negation,” the “return-to-oneself” from alienation, does not occur where it seems to: in the “negation of negation,” Spirit’s negativity is not relativized, subsumed under an encompassing positivity; it is, on the contrary, the “simple negation,” which remains attached to the presupposed positivity it negated, the presupposed Otherness from which it alienates itself, and the “negation of negation” is nothing but the negation of the substantial character of this Otherness itself, the full acceptance of the abyss of Spirit’s self-relating, which retroactively posits all its presuppositions. In other words, once we are in negativity, we never quit it and regain the lost innocence of Origins; it is, on the contrary, only in “negation of negation” that the Origins are truly lost, that their very loss is lost, that they are deprived of the substantial status of that which was lost. The Spirit heals its wound not by directly healing it, but by getting rid of the very full and sane Body into which the wound was cut. It is in this precise sense that, according to Hegel, “the wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind”:<sup>49</sup> Hegel’s point is not that the Spirit heals its wounds so perfectly that, in a magic gesture of retroactive sublation, even their scars disappear; the point is rather that, in the course of a dialectical process, a shift of perspective occurs which makes the wound itself appear as its opposite – the wound itself is its own healing when perceived from another standpoint. This brings us back to the point that, in dialectics, the thought of transformation implies the transformation of thought itself: first, we register the wound of transformation, of a shattering change, but we remain in the previous frame of thought within which the transformation is experienced as a wound; then, we change our frame of thought itself so that the wound no longer appears as a wound.

## **The Parallax of Truth**

At its sharpest, this coincidence of the opposites appears apropos self-consciousness, i.e., subject as thinking:

Abstractly, being evil means singularizing myself in a way that cuts me off from the universal (which is the rational, the laws, the determinations of spirit). But along with this separation there arises being-for-itself and for the first time the universally spiritual, laws – what ought to be. So it is not the case that /rational/ consideration has an external relationship to evil: it is itself what is evil.<sup>50</sup>

Does the Bible not say exactly the same thing? The serpent promises Adam and Eve that, by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, *they* will become like God; and *after the two do it*, God says: “Behold, Adam has become like one of us” (Genesis 3:22). Hegel’s comment is: “So the serpent did not lie, for God confirms what it said.” Then he goes on to reject the claim that what God says is meant with irony:

Cognition is the principle of spirituality, and this /.../ is also the principle by which the injury of the separation is healed. It is in this principle of cognition that the principle of “divinity” is also posited.<sup>51</sup>

Subjective knowledge is not just the possibility of choosing evil or good, “it is the consideration or the cognition that *makes* people evil, so that consideration and cognition /themselves/ are what is evil, and that /therefore/ such cognition is what ought not to exist /because it/ is the *source* of evil.”<sup>52</sup> This is how one should understand Hegel’s dictum from his *Phenomenology*: that Evil is the gaze itself, which perceives Evil everywhere around it: the gaze that sees Evil excludes itself from the social Whole it criticizes; this exclusion is the formal characteristic of Evil. And Hegel’s point is that the Good emerges as a possibility and duty only through this primordial/constitutive choice of Evil: we experience the Good when, after choosing Evil, we become aware of the utter inadequacy of our situation. And the same goes for the relationship between truth and error: truth is not simply the total synthesis of one-sided moments which are in themselves, considered abstractly, errors. The obvious reading of Hegel’s claim that the path to truth (full of errors and impasses) is part of truth itself is that truth is not just the dead corpse of the final result but the living process that



leads to it – but this reading is profoundly wrong, even if some passages in Hegel sound like confirming it. Here is a passage which offers itself to such reading:

[T]his whole movement constitutes what is positive [in it] and its truth. This truth therefore includes the negative also, what would be called the false, if it could be regarded as something from which one might abstract. The evanescent itself must, on the contrary, be regarded as essential, not as something fixed, cut off from the True, and left lying who knows where outside it, any more than the True is to be regarded as something on the other side, positive and dead. Appearance is the arising and passing away that does not itself arise and pass away, but is “in itself,” and constitutes the actuality and the movement of the life of truth.<sup>53</sup>

However, such a reading misses Hegel’s key point: truth is not a synthesis of one-sided partial moments (like: neither unbridled individualism nor organic social unity but a unity which provides space for free individuality), it only emerges when we go to the extreme in one-sidedness. Let’s take the way Hegel describes the conflict between Faith and Enlightenment in the chapter on Spirit. Each position has its own truth: Faith enacts a community of believers dedicated to a shared spiritual Substance; Enlightenment points out that every such Substance is only kept alive by the incessant activity of individuals committed to it. Each position misses the truth of the opposite one: Faith takes the spiritual Substance as an in-itself, which exists independently of its believers; Enlightenment reduces spiritual Substance to an ultimately arbitrary construct of individuals and ignores how the reference to Substance is constitutive of the community of responsible ethical individuals. But Hegel’s point is that both these one-sided “deviations” are necessary, since it is only in this way that their truth can be articulated: there is no order in which the two sides can co-exist in mutual recognition, there is no sublation of the two poles into a higher unity where both sides are synthesized. What follows is the change of terrain into a different, no less one-sided notion (utilitarianism, which then ends up in revolutionary terror), and from

there we move inside, into a moral sphere where at the end reconciliation takes place – but, again, not as a new positive political or ethical order: we pass to another level, that of the absolute (religion, art and philosophy). And at this level, all the contradictions and tensions are reproduced, they reemerge at a new level – how?

The TV series *Messiah* (Michael Petroni, Netflix 2019) directly approaches this topic. It is the story of a young man who in the near future all of a sudden appears in the Middle East, mobilizing followers by claiming he is the Messiah, and performing what appear to be actual miracles (raising the dead, walking on water ...) – is he really the messenger of God or a dangerous fraud, whose aim is to rip to pieces the fragile balance of the world's geopolitical order? What makes the series interesting is precisely its naive directness: the appearance of a new messiah is not used as a pretext to bring out geopolitical and cultural tensions (between Israelis and Palestinians, between secularists and fundamentalists, etc.); its focus is the very belief (that supernatural miracles can happen), *le peu de réel* that such belief implies. The most that rationalists are ready to concede in this respect is a benevolent skepticism – say, when Hegel talks about miracles, he says that it is not important if miracles can really happen, i.e., if the laws of nature can really be broken at some selected points, the true “miracle” is human thought itself through which we elevate ourselves above nature. In his famous prize speech, Habermas voiced his doubts about this simple solution: he is intrigued by the apparent madness of religious people who literally believe, whose belief cannot simply be dissolved by way of its translation into some performative or metaphoric notional content – Christ is not a metaphor, there really was a person walking on this earth 2000 years ago who was the son of God ... Although Habermas admires Brandom, the latter's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* also follows the path of the enlightened translation: Holy Spirit is really the recognitive community of believers, the incarnation of God-the-Father in Christ is just a sensual coating of the deep insight that the eternal Idea only exists through individuals whose activity keeps it alive (the religious version of the philosophical claim that Substance is subject), etc. However, if one reads Hegel's thoughts

on Christianity closely, he cannot be reduced to such a translation. The enigma that bothers him is: but why is the general insight that “God” is a naive representation of our spiritual substance, that we are (if not creating then at least) keeping God alive, not enough? Why does God have to incarnate itself in the immediacy of one single individual? As we have already seen apropos of the ambiguous status of “stubborn immediacy” in Hegel, exactly the same enigma appears in his deduction of monarchy: he, of course, knows very well the lesson of Marx (a king is a king because people treat him as a king, they don’t treat him as a king because he is in himself a king) and Lacan (a madman is not only a beggar who thinks he is a king but also a king who thinks he is a king): the charisma of a king does not originate in some mysterious property of his person, it is a performative effect (“reflexive determination”) of how his subjects treat him. But why, then, is a king needed? If a rational state is the totality that regulates social mediation, why does this totality become actual only when it is incarnated in a single person, who does not create himself through the hard work of mediation but who, in his bodily immediacy, *is* the State, the totality of social mediation? The king is yet another case of the “infinite judgment,” of the direct coincidence of the highest and the lowest, of spiritual totality and bodily immediacy – and, as Hegel points out, only with this ultimate reversal into immediacy do we pass from Understanding to Reason, this reversal is the hardest point for abstract Understanding.

So, back to *Messiah*, the properly Hegelian way to approach the alternative raised by the series (is he the true messiah or not) is to add to it two other interconnected options. First, why the choice (between true messiah and an evil manipulator)? What if he is both – the true divine messenger *and as such* an agent of Evil? Second, what if we displace the alternative into him – what if he himself doesn’t really know if he is a true messiah or a self-deluded manipulator? And the link between these two additional options is that he is evil precisely insofar as he doesn’t know who he truly is ... Again, parallax is irreducible, it can only be displaced, never left behind.

This brings us to another topic ignored by Brandom in his treatment of the ethical substance: the parallax split cuts from within this

substance itself. When Brandom applies his motto of “making it explicit” to the domain of customs (*Sitten*), he strangely ignores the basic fact about customs: they work only as implicit, i.e., insofar as they are not explicitly formulated and directly posited as rules. Politeness, for example, is about what one is expected to do, about tact, not about what one is strictly obliged to do. Therein resides the problem with Political Correctness, which tries to make the rules (about relationships which concern sexuality, religion, race ...) explicit – such a move threatens to destroy the ethical substance of our lives: instead of a living texture of mores we get the utter alienation of isolated individuals coldly calculating the rules they follow in order to survive the brave new world of Political Correctness ... Brought to the extreme, the passion of “making it explicit” ends up in a perverted universe in which my very reflective awareness of what I am doing functions as a fetish, which enables me to go on doing it. As Peter Sloterdijk put it, this is the formula of cynical reason: they know very well what they are doing, but they are still doing it.

In order to function effectively, the substance of mores has to be split, it has to imply its own inherent transgression, it has to contain some kind of meta-rules which regulate how the explicit public rules can (and *had* to) be violated. And the function of today’s obscene masters, such as Donald Trump, is precisely that they “make explicit” the obscene underside of the public order of rules, that they enact it openly. During a recent visit to Bergen, I was told a wonderful example of how politeness works in everyday life, subverting the usual market negotiations.<sup>54</sup> There was a custom in traditional fishing communities that, when a fisherman returned from the sea with a boat full of fishes, a neighbor helped him to unload the loot and carry it to the house. After the work was done, the fisherman offered to the neighbor a package of fishes as a retribution for the latter’s help. Now the custom enters: to make the point that he didn’t help the fisherman for the reward, the neighbor insists that he will pay the fisherman for the package of fishes; the fisherman doesn’t want any money and then a negotiation ensues which turns around the standard market haggling – the buyer insists on a high price, while the seller is ready to accept only a much lower sum

for his product. The compromise reached is most often that the neighbor gives the fisherman a minimal sum of money which has a purely symbolic value ... a brilliant example of unwritten rules sustaining the explicit content.

Another aspect of what Brandom ignores here is the logic of redoubled fake, which characterizes human language. Let's take the case of the notorious "Protocols of Zion": it is convincingly proven that they were fabricated by the secret service of the Russian empire – already numerous factual mistakes in the text make it clear beyond doubt that they are a fake. But some anti-Semites nonetheless stick to their claim that the Protocols are authentic, and their answer to the obvious reproach that there are mistakes in the text is: Jews themselves introduced mistakes to make it appear that the Protocols are a forgery, so that gentiles would not take them seriously, while those in the know will be able to use them as a guideline in peace, free of suspicions ... What this disgusting line of argumentation mobilizes is a logic of redoubled fake, which is operative only in human symbolic space: while the Russian secret service just tried to sell a fake as truth, the Zionists did the opposite, they masked/presented the truth itself as a fake, a forgery, to neutralize critical outrage ...

## **Method and Content**

This brings us back to our beginning, to the tension in Hegel between philosophy always coming too late, reduced to painting gray on gray, and philosophy as the voice of the need to act in a messy period of crisis. The conclusion is not that we are condemned to fail, and that all we can do is to reflect retroactively on the reasons of our failure. We have to act, to intervene, and the direction of our acts is imposed by our historical experience:

Change seems indeed to have a direction, and the direction it takes does make a difference to us. And yet, as we face the unknown we must acknowledge that change in itself is not necessarily progressive nor has the certitude of a guaranteed (let alone positive) end. Progress – whatever it may mean – can never be taken for granted. /.../ The result still belongs to the realm of the “unknown,” which lays beyond the process of transformation at its very conclusion. And the philosopher, as Hegel states in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, being immersed in the process, should attend only to such a process and refrain from making arbitrary predictions.<sup>55</sup>

The reason for this lack of certitude of the final outcome of our intervention is not that the situation is too complex but that we cannot control the effects of our own intervention into the situation we are part of. As Nuzzo repeatedly insists, thinking (social) transformation implies the transformation of our thinking itself. What this means is that, when we act with a program or goal in our mind, *this goal itself changes in the process of its actualization*. It is not just that, when we are, say, fighting for Communism, we should proceed cautiously, taking into account unforeseen new circumstance. Our Communist project is itself caught in the process of transformation, so that, with every stage of the struggle, it has to be fundamentally redefined. Therein resides the basic difference between Hegel and Marx: while they both see the present as a time of crisis, which gives rise to the need to radically change the situation, Marx saw in proletariat a historical agent, which, to put it simply, knows what it has to do and what it is doing, while Hegel insists on the ultimate non-transparency of our social acts.

The passage from thinking transformation to the transformation of thinking itself occurs in the domain of notion. At the level of Being, “everything changes,” we have the incessant transformation of every entity in the eternal flow of things; at the level of Essence, the eternal transformation of appearances reflects an underlying stable essence; at the level of Notion, change is transposed into the essence itself, i.e., the gap that separates appearance from essence separates essence itself –

it's not that appearance never fully fits its essence, essence itself is barred by the Real of an immanent impossibility, which pushes it to change. What this implies is that Hegel is not just a historicist who analyzes permanent flow and change in all things: what he focuses on is the simultaneous change in the very conceptual apparatus by means of which we conceive of change. In the change from medieval time to modernity, the very notion of social change changed radically.

Zambrana<sup>56</sup> succinctly describes the two main features of the Hegelian dialectical process:

Precariousness and ambivalence, for Hegel, are not the unfortunate effects of the temporal or social character of intelligibility. Method establishes negativity as an irreducible feature of intelligibility, which introduces a structural precariousness and ambivalence to any form of rationality. Precariousness and ambivalence are features of the actuality of any form of rationality. 132

When Zambrana insists on the precariousness and ambivalence of the dialectical process, one should carefully distinguish these two dimensions – they are not just two terms for the same feature.

Precariousness is the general feature of the overall process, which is radically contingent: when something new emerges (like the idea of modern freedom or human rights), it might not have happened, it might have been crushed before it took form, it might have taken another form, we can see the logic that brought it out only retroactively, every causal chain “will have been” once the result is here. Ambivalence, on the contrary, stands for an immanent necessity: when a figure appears – say, again, modern freedom and human rights – it actualizes itself in the form of its opposite (absolute freedom becomes terror, human rights a form of market slavery). To introduce openness here and to claim that human rights might have developed into a form that would not have involved market slavery is a bad utopia: market slavery (or, as Marx put it, relations of domination turned into relations between things) are the actualized “truth” of bourgeois human freedom. The same social constellation that gave birth to human rights and modern freedom gave birth to modern terror and market slavery. The

contingency and openness of the historical process means that it is not determined in advance if the New (human rights, freedom ...) will emerge at all as a new Master-Signifier; but once it emerges, its turning into its opposite is necessary. Of course, there are degrees of this negative actualization of a positive new value (we are not all condemned to deadly terror), but the tendency is necessary, inscribed into the very notion of “bourgeois” freedom, which means that to get rid of this danger one has to redefine the very “positive” notion of freedom. It seems that Zambrana herself sometimes blurs this distinction, as in the following passage:

Negativity is the inner determination of the way in which intelligibility is articulated within discursive formations that Hegel calls the real sciences or institutions such as modern ethical life. When considered from the perspective of the necessity of form, negativity calls into question the assumption that the content of concepts retains stability when “playing role” in a historically specific form of intelligibility. Negativity establishes that concrete forms of rationality are precarious, since they are commitments that have or cease to have grip within a given shape of Geist. They are also ambivalent, given that they accommodate opposite valences even when enjoying normative authority. They are subject not only to reversals of meanings and effects, but also to coextensive positive and negative meanings and effects. 132

There is a gap indicated by the expression “they are also ambivalent”: ambivalence is a different feature; it doesn’t occur because a commitment doesn’t have a full grip within a given shape but precisely when a commitment *does* have a full grip. Back to our example: human freedom turns into market slavery precisely when the market economy has a full grip on socio-economic life. As Zambrana is well aware, “ambivalence” doesn’t mean here that a normative commitment is imperfect when measured by some ideal trans-historical standard: the ambivalence is strictly immanent – say, in our example, when bourgeois freedom turns into market slavery, it violates its own standards, it displays its “self-contradiction.” Let’s take another example, that of a state. A state is supposed to provide a frame for the harmonious co-



existence of all classes and strata; however, according to Marxism, State is an instrument of class oppression; it privileges the ruling class at the expense of others. The task is therefore not to transform the state so that it will be truly neutral and not privilege one class, but to abolish it and, as well as its cause, the class antagonism – again, the task is not to adjust the actual state to its concept but to change this concept itself. While Zambrana is fully aware of this, she reduces negativity to the force that makes every determinate historical form precarious, destined to disintegrate sooner or later. What she ignores is the opposite move: how the negative movement negates itself by way of contracting into a new fixed positivity – this is what Hegel calls determinate negation. This passage into a new positive order is, of course, not predetermined: it can only be reconstructed retroactively. And it is, of course, never a definitive outcome: it is fragile and it will disappear in its own time. But, again, it seems that Zambrana focuses only on the negative aspect of the Hegelian method, which is why she characterizes Hegel's thinking as "critical":

Method thus informs a *critical* thinking of nature and eventually spirit, since it makes explicit the historicity and ambivalence of intelligibility. It cannot provide a norm or demand to live according to reason /.../ because any given assessment must refer to concrete forms of rationality distinctive of a historically specific mode of intelligibility.

132–133

While the claim that "any given assessment must refer to concrete forms" is in principle true, it can also be read in the sense that Method is a general critical approach that we apply to some concrete historical content upon which we stumble, i.e., which we simply find as given. This is why it is problematic to characterize Hegel as a critical thinker: his Method cannot provide a new definitive norm, but it conceptualizes the passage from one to another normative commitment. His Method is not just critical negativity, which historicizes/relativizes any fixed content, it is also the explanation of how and why every natural or historical flux has to reverse into a fixed content.

We have to be very precise here: Zambrana is right to see the core of Hegelian Method in irreducible negativity. At the very beginning of his philosophy of spirit, Hegel deals with madness: for him, madness is not an accidental lapse, distortion, “illness” of human spirit, but something that is inscribed into the individual spirit’s basic ontological constitution: to be a human means to be potentially mad:

This interpretation of insanity as a necessarily occurring form or stage in the development of the soul is naturally not to be understood as if we were asserting that *every* mind, *every* soul, must go through this stage of extreme derangement. Such an assertion would be as absurd as to assume that because in the Philosophy of Right crime is considered as a necessary manifestation of the human will, therefore to commit crime is an inevitable necessity for *every* individual. Crime and insanity are *extremes*, which the human mind *in general* has to overcome in the course of its development.<sup>57</sup> Although not a factual necessity, madness is a formal possibility constitutive of human mind: it is something whose threat has to be overcome if we are to emerge as “normal” subjects, which means that “normality” can only arise as the overcoming of this threat. This is why, as Hegel put it a couple of pages later, “insanity must be discussed before the healthy, intellectual consciousness, although it has that consciousness for its *presupposition*.”<sup>58</sup>

In a strictly homologous way, at the very end of his philosophy of history, Hegel may appear to celebrate the *prosaic* character of life in a well-organized modern state, where the heroic disturbances are overcome in the tranquillity of private rights and the security of the satisfaction of needs. In this organic order, universality and particular interests appear reconciled: the “infinite right” of subjective singularity is given its due, individuals no longer experience the objective state order as a foreign power intruding onto their rights, they recognize in it the substance and frame of their very freedom ... However, at this very point, Hegel asserts the necessity of war: in war, universality reasserts its right against and over the concrete–organic appeasement in the

prosaic social life. Is thus the necessity of war not the ultimate proof that, for Hegel, every social reconciliation is doomed to fail, that no organic social order can effectively contain the force of abstract-universal negativity? This is why social life is condemned to the “spurious infinity” of the eternal oscillation between stable civic life and wartime perturbations.

Does this mean that we are back at the standard *topos* of the excess of negativity, which cannot be “sublated” in any reconciling “synthesis,” or even at the naive Engelsian view of the alleged contradiction between the openness of Hegel’s “method” and the enforced closure of his “system”? The underlying true problem is the following one: the standard “Hegelian” scheme of death (negativity) as the subordinate/mediating moment of Life can only be sustained if we remain within the category of Life whose dialectic is that of the self-mediating Substance returning to itself from its otherness. The moment we effectively pass from Substance to Subject, from Life(-principle) to Death(-principle), there is no encompassing “synthesis”; death in its “abstract negativity” forever remains as a threat, an excess that cannot be economized. In social life, this means that Kant’s universal peace is a vain hope, that *war* forever remains a threat of the total disruption of organized state Life; in individual subjective life, that *madness* always lurks as a possibility.<sup>59</sup>

So, where here is reconciliation? It is not an ideal that we cannot ever actualize, it is the reconciliation with the very excess of negativity – this is what Absolute Knowing is about. Zambrana is fully justified in critically rejecting the two opposed contemporary readings of Hegel, Pippin/Brandom’s and Karin de Boer’s.<sup>60</sup> De Boer offers a standard deconstructionist reading of Hegel: the basic “tragic strand” of his thought, absolute negativity as the undermining of every identity and reconciliation, is entangled by the totalizing thrust of his later work; a “logic of entanglement” (of dialectical mediation of the opposites) thus undercuts the work of tragic negativity. In contrast to De Boer, Pippin and Brandom “entangle” negativity within the frame of a gradual normative progress: negativity means that every normative stance is

precarious, only future will retroactively decide on its validity – or, as Zambrana formulates this position with even too much sympathy for Brandom’s progressivism:

Brandom’s insistence is that normative authority is a matter of authorization over time within a shape of *Geist*. We refer to past specification of a normative commitment but reformulate its content in light of new cases. Only future judges, however, could determine whether the present specification is authoritative given their vantage point. 131

However, negativity is not just this endless process of progressive self-overcoming, it’s not just an indicator that we are never There, at the endpoint, that our own position is always precarious, open to the revision by future judges – as we have just seen apropos madness and war, negativity is primarily the excess which threatens to destroy the entire order. This radical negativity is not an irreparable tragic excess with regard to the reconciliation in Absolute Knowing: the insight into this excess in the irreducible background of every rational order is what constitutes Absolute Knowing, i.e., “absolute Idea” is Hegel’s name for the reconciliation with this excess.

So, let’s conclude with the way Zambrana contrasted the standard Hegelian–Marxist notion of immanent critique to “a conception of critique that, rather than being guided by normative criteria that can be distilled from the socio-historical phenomenon at hand, is attuned to, following Adorno, the ‘undiminished persistence of suffering’ that remains in a world ‘which could be paradise here and now – [yet] can become hell itself tomorrow.’ It is a form of ongoing critique that remains vigilant of the inversion of any normative criteria immanent to social reality.”<sup>61</sup> Does this form of critique not resuscitate the deepest lesson of Hegelian critical analysis: it is not enough to criticize the present on behalf of its own immanent norms or, more broadly, emancipatory potentials; one should remain vigilant about how these emancipatory potentials reproduce at a deeper level the (antagonist) structure of the present, so that their actualization can turn into its opposite? “The object of critique not only remains the modes of

suffering distinctive to a given form of life, but also the normative commitments implicated in these forms of suffering. /.../ It tracks not how these commitments are distorted by contingent conditions. Rather, it tracks how suffering is an effect of the work of those commitments.”<sup>62</sup> Is the fate of the October Revolution not an exemplary case of how a world “which could be paradise here and now /.../ can become hell itself tomorrow”? The emancipatory dream of a Communist paradise turned into the hell of the Stalinist terror ...

Should we then not turn around Brandom’s motif of the “spirit of trust,” i.e., is the deepest feature of a true Hegelian approach not a spirit of *distrust*? That is to say, Hegel’s basic axiom is not the teleological premise that, no matter how terrible an event is, at the end it will turn out to be a subordinated moment that contributes to the overall harmony; his axiom is that no matter how well planned and meant an idea or a project is, it will somehow turn out wrong: the Greek organic community of a *polis* turns into a fraternal war, the medieval fidelity based on honor turns into empty flattery, the revolutionary striving for universal freedom turns into terror ... Hegel’s point is not that this bad turn could have been avoided (say, if only the French revolutionaries were to constrain themselves to realize concrete freedom of an organic social order of estates and not the abstract freedom-equality of all, the bloodshed could have been prevented) – we have to accept that there is no direct path to concrete freedom, the “reconciliation” resides just in the fact that we resign ourselves to the permanent threat of destruction, which is a positive condition of our freedom. For example, Hegel’s vision of state is that of a hierarchic order of estates held together ethically by the permanent threat of war. So, what if we consider a progress that goes further, toward a post-Hegelian parliamentary liberal democracy? It would have been easy for Hegel to point out how the unheard-of carnage of the Great War emerged as the truth of the nineteenth-century gradual peaceful progress. It is easy to imagine the glee with which Hegel would have analyzed the immanent logic of how a liberal society leads to fascism, or how a radical emancipatory project ends up in Stalinism, or how the triumph of

global capitalism in 1990 paved the way for the populist New Right ... – *this* is the task for us, Hegelians, today.

## Notes

1. Although, in my opinion, it is not the best opening – this title goes to *Marquise of O* by Heinrich von Kleist, which begins with a one-sentence paragraph informing us that the widowed Marquise von O. placed an announcement in the newspapers in a prominent north Italian town, saying that she is pregnant and wishes the father of her child to make himself known to her so that she can marry him.
2. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/03/uk/vegan-discrimination-intl-scli-gbr/index.html>.
3. See Laszlo Foldenyi, *Dostoyevsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts into Tears* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).
4. Aaron Schuster, “Beyond Satire,” in William Mozzarella, Eric Santner, Aaron Schuster, *Sovereignty Inc. Three Inquiries in Politics and Enjoyment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 228.
5. Op. cit., pp. 229–230.
6. See “Viruses of the Mind” ([bactra.org](http://bactra.org)).
7. Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 173.
8. Angelica Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel’s Logic Obliquely* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), p. 3.
9. Op. cit., p. 6.
10. When Robert Pippin proposes the Swedish Social Democracy as a political model, decades ago, should our answer not be that this is yet another case of thought “painting gray on gray,” bringing-to-concept a social reality whose time has already passed? Friends from Sweden recently wrote to me that, perhaps, from the standpoint of his historical role, Olof Palme died (was murdered) exactly at the

right moment: if he had lived longer, he would have had to witness the gradual decline of the Swedish welfare state, and his early death spared him this sad fate ...

11. Robert Brandom, *The Spirit of Trust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019). Numbers in the text refer to the pages of this book.
12. <https://iai.tv/articles/hegel-for-our-times-judith-butler-auid-1273>.
13. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 210.
14. If world history is a calvary of the Spirit, where, then, is a space of happiness in all this? Hegel's answer is clear: in the places and epochs out of history (in Hegel's sense of historical progress: when, from the standpoint of History, nothing happens).
15. Rocio Zambrana, "Critique in Hegel and Marx," in Victoria Fareld and Hannes Kuch, eds, *From Marx to Hegel and Back* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 115.
16. In a more refined approach, one should distinguish two levels of distance here. First, there is the widespread stance of distance, which only confirms our inner belonging – say, true patriots are not stupid fanatic zealots, they love to make fun of their country ... Then, there is a more radical cynical distance, like, for example, the one that prevailed in the Soviet Union in Brezhnev's time of "stagnation" – after the fall of Krushchev, nomenklatura no longer took its own ideology seriously; Krushchev was the last Soviet leader who really believed in Communism.
17. See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/22/rape-joke-metoo-movement-career-repercussions>.
18. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 263.



19. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/26/tom-cotton-slavery-necessary-evil-1619-project-new-york-times>.

20. Quoted from  
<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/kant/kant1.htm>.

21. See Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

22. Molly Rothenberg, *The Excessive Subject* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 7.

23.  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm>.

24. See <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/may/15/columbo-jump-the-shark>, as well as <https://columbophile.com/2019/07/28/columbo-episode-review-last-salute-to-the-commodore/>. The Perry Mason series also has an exception, although of a different kind: “The Case of the Fugitive Fraulein” (season 9, episode 12). Physicist Hans Ritter has been contacted by an East German and told that his six-year-old granddaughter Elke is living in an East Berlin orphanage. If he’ll return to East Germany and work for the Communists, Elke will be released to Ritter’s wife. Perry agrees to negotiate for the scientist, goes to East Berlin and gets involved in a murder case behind the Iron Curtain – he has to defend Ritter’s wife before an East German court, where the Communists don’t play fair ... The obvious failure of this episode does not reside in the way it relies heavily on the standard anti-Communist clichés but, quite on the contrary, in how the East German Communist functionary (who plays the mediating role of a judge) nonetheless “listens to reason” and accepts Mason’s conclusion about who is the murderer. The presupposition is that, even in East Germany, there is a space for the Mason-style legal reasoning and its bravura ...

25. <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/interview/noam-chomsky-2>.



- [26.](#) I rely here on Benjamin Berger, “‘The Idea that is’: On the Transition from Logic to Nature in Hegel’s System,” *Pli. The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (2019).
- [27.](#) Quoted from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* ([marxists.org](http://marxists.org)).
- [28.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Part I: Logic (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 286, § 212.
- [29.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 21.
- [30.](#) Op. cit., p. 365.
- [31.](#) See Sebastian Rödl, *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity: An Introduction to Absolute Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- [32.](#) Rödl, op. cit., p. 13.
- [33.](#) Quoted from <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/self-consciousness-and-objectivity-an-introduction-to-absolute-idealism/>.
- [34.](#) Rödl, op. cit., p. 18.
- [35.](#) Op. cit., p. 11.
- [36.](#) Quoted from <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/self-consciousness-and-objectivity-an-introduction-to-absolute-idealism/>.
- [37.](#) Rödl, op. cit., p. 55.
- [38.](#) Op. cit., p. 154.
- [39.](#) Op. cit., p. 155.
- [40.](#) Irad Kimhi, *Thinking and Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 7.
- [41.](#) <https://virtualcritique.wordpress.com/2018/12/18/on-irad-kimhis-thinking-and-being-or-its-the-end-of-analytic-philosophy-as-we-know-it-and-i-feel-fine/>.

- [42.](#) See Adrian Johnston, “The Difference Between Fichte’s and Hegel’s System of Philosophy,” *Pli. The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (2019).
- [43.](#) Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *La marque du sacré* (Paris: Carnets Nord 2008).
- [44.](#) Op. cit., p. 13.
- [45.](#) G.W.F.Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 667.
- [46.](#) Op. cit., p. 669.
- [47.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, “Entwürfe über Religion und Liebe,” in *Frühe Schriften, Werke 1* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 244.
- [48.](#) Quoted from *Marx’s Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* ([marxists.org](http://marxists.org)).
- [49.](#) Hegel, op. cit., p. 129.
- [50.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen ueber die Philosophie der Religion II* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), p. 206.
- [51.](#) Op. cit., p. 207.
- [52.](#) Op. cit., p. 205.
- [53.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 29.
- [54.](#) My source is Sigmund Grønmo, Chair of the Holberg Board, Bergen.
- [55.](#) Nuzzo, op. cit., pp. 15–16.
- [56.](#) Rocio Zambrana, *Hegel’s Theory of Intelligibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Numbers in the text refer to the pages of this book.
- [57.](#) Hegel, *Encyclopedia*, Par. 408, Addition.
- [58.](#) Ibid.

[59.](#) For a more detailed analysis of the status of this excess in Hegel, see Interlude 3 in my *Less than Nothing* (London: Verso, 2013).

[60.](#) See Karin de Boer, *On Hegel: The Sway of the Negative* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[61.](#) Rocio Zambrana, "Critique in Hegel and Marx," p. 110.

[62.](#) Op. cit., p. 112.

## 2

### ***Hegel on the Rocks: Remarks on the Concept of Nature***

“We need more than physics in order to interpret nature [*um Natur auszulegen*]. Physics is nothing but the alphabet. Nature is an equation with unknown quantities [*Größe*], a Hebrew word that is written with nothing but consonants, for which the understanding must dot the Is [*die Punkte setzen muss*].” Hamann to Kant<sup>1</sup>

“People do, literally, not know what they are saying: such is the starting point for the dialectician.” G. Lebrun<sup>2</sup>

“Nature is parts without a whole.” Alberto Caiero<sup>3</sup>

### **New Geriatrics, or: Newly Born Old**

Hegel is back. The times (in philosophy seem to) have changed. Not entirely, but in ways that can seem rather difficult to trace. Since, for a steadily growing number of scholars, Hegel is no longer one of, and certainly not the most reviled and divisive figure(s) in the history of philosophy. Many of the previously prevalent caricature-critiques of Hegel that depicted him as the megalomaniac philosopher who brought everything (in philosophy and beyond) to an unbearable and extreme end seem to have lost their credibility. Today it seems to have become safe to refer to, work on Hegel, and even to identify oneself as a Hegelian of some kind, without necessarily getting one’s finger (or head and career) burned. One might still need to take some distance from him, since it might still be dangerous to over-identify but, overall and today, Hegel and being a Hegelian seems just fine. What happened? Has the thinker of contradiction finally overcome all contradiction, even the contradiction engendered by and embodied in the opposition to his system? Is this the problematic and ultimately far too harmonious reconciliation for which Hegel’s critics have previously so often scorned

him and for which some of his defenders always liked him – is this the ultimate reconciliatory form of idealism? Or has divisiveness become the new chic? The current Hegel renaissance does not necessarily fall into either of these categories. Hegel returned. And he returned to the very crime-scene on which all kinds of philosophical investigators and crime-fighters had previously identified him as the ultimate villain, as the one thinker who might have been even worse than Plato. This crime-scene, obviously, is philosophy. However, Hegel did not return as the perpetrator that he was once supposed or suspected to be. Hegel, the villain, was previously identified as he who thinks (that thinking always works) in terms of totality and was thus totalitarian, who sees reason in history and thus justifies it, who declares the end of art, history, and philosophy and thus imprisons everything that comes after. The complaints and charges raised against him were at least as explosive, extravagant, and excessive as the complainers claimed his philosophy was. But the now returned Hegel is a refashioned one. His explosive, extravagant, and excessive kernel, – a kernel whose name or label was “absolute idealism”<sup>4</sup> – substance or force is presently greeted with an increasing amount of composed moderation. Might the Hegelian extravagance have been mere extravaganza after all, which unnecessarily sidetracked Hegel’s reader into believing that one had to take sides with or against (and this even within) Hegel?

In many respects and in today’s situation, Hegel seems to have become increasingly likeable. The celebration of his 250th birthday in 2020, even though mostly prevented by a global pandemic, did not present too difficult a task for most of the congratulators, and proved on average to be at least as easy as, if not easier than, the celebration of the anniversary of Martin Luther’s famous theses-nailing in 2017. This was the case, even though Luther defended quite anti-Semitic positions in his later life and his engagement against the revolting peasants deserves, at the least, a thorough and evaluative discussion. But there was nothing of that, i.e. problematic, kind at Hegel’s birthday celebration. It seems to have become common sense that he has returned in far more digestible and moderate guise and costume, because everything in him was ultimately meant far less crazily and

megalomaniacally than previous generations of readers assumed. It sounded bad, but it was just the sound and not the substance. It is as if he finally grew up, according to his own depiction of the “*course of the age of life*.”<sup>5</sup> Therein the human being moves from a “natural harmony” in childhood, wherein all emerging “oppositions ... remain without deeper interest,” to its youth, wherein the world appears to be always wrong, whereas the young are always right; a position that is then overcome when the youth see that the world is the place of substantial activity and therefore one must acquire “the skill necessary for substance,” whereby the young person has grown up. Now, “the man ... views the ethical world-order ... as essentially complete” whereby one is “active for the substance, not against” it and therein takes an interest. When this interest is lost, the human being has reached “old age”<sup>6</sup> and “has abandoned hope of actualizing the ideals he cherished earlier and the future promises him nothing new at all; ... he believes he already knows the universal ... The mind of the old man is thus turned only towards ... the past to which he owes the knowledge of this universal.”<sup>7</sup> There is nothing new in the world, everything is as past and old as the old gaze that only sees the old in the world. Has Hegelian thought finally grown up and old? Did the thinker who early on received the nickname of the “old man” now and really get old? Does this mean to lose all hope? The situation is topsy-turvier or more dialectical than it seems. If Hegel had been an old man all along, might it not be the case that now Hegel’s readers have finally grown (up) and aged with him? Did all this happen according to the course of the stages of life that he depicted? Or are – cultural – mixtures between the ages possible (for example, when some of the elderly still believe that they are or behave as if they still were younger than they are, or some of the young are effectively acting as if they were old already)?

One could be tempted to see such a natural aging process in the post-Hegelian aftermath in the following way: First and immediately there was no real opposition – or all opposition did not really matter. There was a kind of natural harmony during the time when Hegel’s philosophy was still just involved in its own reproduction and in

breeding its own progeny. But soon appeared the *young* Hegelians, who countered not only their always already *geriatric* Hegelian siblings, they also and fundamentally emphasized the difference between the Hegelian view of the world and the real and factual world. “[T]he life of the *species*,”<sup>8</sup> species-life as the early Marx affirmatively calls it, began to stir in Hegel’s young pupils and they “fancie[d] [themselves] called and qualified [*berufen und befähigt*] to transform the world, or at least to readjust the world that seem[ed] to be out of joint [*aus den Fugen*].”<sup>9</sup> The world was out of joint, and therefore a joint effort was called for to change it. For the young-Hegelians, Hegel allowed to see the worldly out-of-jointness but fell short of appropriately providing means to transform or readjust it. Hence, the world needed changing as much as Hegel needed a material readjustment. On the other hand, Hegel’s geriatric children, the always-already aged ones had no issues with Hegel. They zoomed in on the elements of his thought, which in their interpretation almost naturally lent themselves to being sources of conservation (the state and religion, for example). There was no felt and identified opposition, since there was one who knew it all, the über-father, he who had bequeathed to them the pass to the past and the future, a *passe-partout*, which now only had to be appropriately administered.

The contemporary Hegel renaissance does not seem to fall into either of the two categories: neither does Hegel’s return entail a repetition of the revolutionary-spirited, young Hegelian approach, since it is far less critical of Hegel and less practically or transformatively inclined. Nor does the present Hegel-comeback simply bring back the recognition of Hegel’s objective spirit and of those elements (of absolute spirit) that can be read in a consolidating manner, even though some dominant forms of Hegelianism often emphasize the objectively necessary requirements for functioning social interaction (for example as potentially depicted in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* or even in his *Aesthetics*). Yet, the present type of Hegelianism that created some momentum recently has rather been described as essentially liberal, and as emphasizing the potentially fragile, but often consolidating elements of practices. It is a Hegelianism of the social bond, of its

institutions and enactments, yet one which thereby at the very same time also attempts to cherish all that which one ought not to take for granted, since it has been a product of history. It is a position that often indicates why one can leave aside the elements of Hegel's thought that traditionally appeared as obstacles and disturbing to any liberal reading of Hegel (recall the insistence on the necessity of war and constitutional monarchy, the claim that we are reading God's mind before the creation of the world in the *Science of the Logic*, or all the declarations of the end of history or art, to name but a few).<sup>10</sup> One can detect a surprising combination of young and old Hegelian operations in the contemporary Hegel renewal. To consciously overgeneralize, this position can be characterized as that of the novel geriatrics, of a renovated and newly born senescence, a neo-senescence. In the present conjuncture the return of and to Hegel is not simply a return to an old Hegel or an old Hegelian return, but one that combines old and new elements. It manages to rejuvenate old Hegelianism without turning it into young Hegelianism. Young Hegelian elements – a dissatisfaction with certain claims and implications in and of Hegel's system and potentially even a dissatisfaction with the present "real" world – are reorganized and repurposed such that they fulfill a, thereby transformed, old-Hegelian agenda. Hegel needed a young-Hegelian transformation, at least some adjustment to serve the purpose old-Hegelianism intended his thought to serve. The novel geriatrics present a Hegelian New Deal.<sup>11</sup>

Thereby one had to cut and sever what in Hegel appears not up to present-day standards.<sup>12</sup> One had to leave out what could appear to be nothing but mere historical material, conviction, or attitude and thereby "push[es] to the foreground and extol[s] what is or seems acceptable."<sup>13</sup> This can at times feel like a "doctoring"<sup>14</sup> of Hegelian thought. Such doctored Hegel does no longer appear to be one of the most irritating thinkers in the history of philosophy. He is neither any longer the great conceptual omnivore nor someone who took reason so seriously that it amounted to madness. The doctored, transformed, and adjusted neo-geriatric Hegel has rather become the paradigmatic



thinker of democratic interaction and communicative reason(ing). Not a statist thinker or a thinker of stasis, but an essentially dynamic and progressive one, whose philosophical credentials lie in making us understand the essentially dynamic nature of norms of life that are intertwined with the natural dynamic of (rational) forms of life. In and through emphasizing intersubjective practices of mutual cooperative challenges, Hegel allows us to grasp that social practice makes us who we are and want to be. In this sense, he became a thinker of trust. Because, ultimately, he is “not an other in [our] eyes,” but essential like us. A thinker whom, essentially, we can “trust (which may pass over into a greater or lesser degree of educated insight)”;<sup>15</sup> he is essentially one of us, someone belonging to and sharing the same value system and with whom therefore all “oppositions ... remain without deeper interest”<sup>16</sup> – because we can always readjust (him), so that we can take his thought as our “oppositionless beginning” as well as we can take it as our “oppositionless end.”<sup>17</sup>

Hegel’s own account of trust, the trust that may become educated insight, is a crucial component of what he calls patriotism. Are we thus finding true Hegelian patriots in the novel geriatric Hegelians? Has Hegel become the new state of the old mind or the new mind of the old state, wherein we can live happily ever after, chanting and enchanted by the songs of reason, hands on our hearts, eyes up into the starry sky? All this obviously sounds rather Kantian. It may therefore be high time to bring back some of Hegel’s divisiveness and split even the old age into two. Some geriatrics know that “philosophy in any case always arrives on the scene too late to give”<sup>18</sup> instructions about how things ought to be and that it can thus not operate normatively (or prescriptively). Others believe that even though they do not know it all, they have at least found a way to decipher the form, framework, and space that determines all human activity and in which all its determinations and content will naturally take place. This form is the form of rationality. It is taken to be the natural human life form/norm to which the newly old Hegelians patriotically pledge their trusting loyalty. Here one can specify what the difference between the different

old ages might fundamentally amount to: Hegel indicated that all patriotism presupposes getting used to orienting our will in a certain way, i.e. to a certain form of willing collectively, and that this generates the subjective conviction that the overall organizational framework (the state) is adequately suited for me to realize what I endeavor to realize within it. The combination of these two elements (willing and conviction) is what Hegel addresses as trust (in objective spirit). I am certain that I am able to will the way I truly want to, because I learned what it means to will properly in concert with others, and that I can only realize my own freedom because of the others whose realization of freedom I therefore equally have to endorse. Trust becomes thus a way in which objective structures are subjectivized and thus reproducible. But Hegel immediately adds a far-reaching remark. He points out that trust comes with problems and a temporality of its own:

We trust that the state must subsist and that in it alone particular interests can be secured. But habit blinds us to that on which our whole existence depends. When we walk the streets at night in safety, it does not strike us that this might be otherwise.<sup>19</sup>

Once the status quo is established it is rather easy to become blind toward its very constitution. We then take not only the established contents but the established form to be something unhistorically given. The state can always turn into a new state of nature. This is the case, because one of the components of trust is habit, whose effect is the creation of a second nature. This very nature can make history invisible by making its results appear natural. Trust can therefore lead us to dehistoricize and naturalize what is. What we trust in can thus become so natural to us that we take it for granted and to be a given. This even concerns what was produced by means of freedom and struggle and that is ultimately freedom itself. Too much trust in freedom and rationality does make invisible that freedom and rationality are not a natural given, even though this is what they appear to be. This is thus the danger of old age. It can look back onto history and only see (human) nature. It means to take freedom as a given norm-form, normative form, and formative norm of how humans qua rational-

natural beings operate. The new geriatric Hegelians naturalize the products of freedom and spirit in such a way that they naturalize freedom and spirit itself. What is thereby obliterated – but old age is forgetful – that spirit “is not the mere result of nature, but is in truth its own result.”<sup>20</sup> Geriatric Hegelianism is thus a forgetful form of (Hegelian) naturalism, a way of reading Hegel that naturalizes him.<sup>21</sup> But let us not forget here that “*natural reason* is an oblique expression”<sup>22</sup> and that the claim that “man is a naturally free being [*ein natürlich Freies*] is ... a determination that ultimately contradicts itself.”<sup>23</sup>

What were the conditions of possibility that allowed for the emergence of such a reading of Hegel? From a – consciously vulgarizing – historical materialist perspective, one could be tempted to see in it an expression of a transformation of the historical world. The world-making and globally constitutive antagonism that previously was embodied in the two major blocks of power, the socialist and the capitalist one, disappeared. With its apparent solidity having evaporated as much into thin air as Marx and Engels indicated that everything stable would in a capitalist economy,<sup>24</sup> i.e. with the collapse of the socialist regimes, the disappearance and lack of any global alternative produced effects on many different levels. Without the slightest nostalgia toward these regimes – since they disappeared for good reasons<sup>25</sup> – one can note that this decline was not simply a great event for – and proof of – the longevity of Western capitalist and liberal democracies, as it was often interpreted to be. There is something categorically different in this disappearance in comparison to world-historical events like, for example, the French Revolution, which enthused Kant, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel. Since the disappearance did not bring about something genuinely new. Rather, in it became manifest a political crisis. The withering away of these states was preceded and precipitated by a withering away of politics itself – which is also one of the reasons why “in all this, people played practically no part.”<sup>26</sup> With the disappearance of one side of the previously existing alternative, the alternative itself disappeared – notwithstanding the fact that it may

have been a problematic one all along. But the decline of the alternative brought with it an actual disappearance of politics that ultimately manifested as, and led to, a naturalization of the way things are. The new old Hegelian patriotism can from this perspective be read as a philosophical registration, a philosophical symptom of this very disappearance of politics. It is disappearance of opposition, of contradiction that manifests in and is a naturalization of the given (and it can do so because everyone is now left with “the first social organization, in which it is possible to say that this organization is very bad”<sup>27</sup> and practically nothing follows from it).

The novel senescence naturally tends to naturalize by methodologically and inventively short-circuiting very young and very old age – two life-stages of oppositionlessness in Hegel’s account fused into one, oppositionlessness squared. Consequently, Hegel is presented as one of the masterminds of what was coined as democratic materialism,<sup>28</sup> that is, less a thinker of exclusion, extinction, exception, and negativity than of inclusion, insemination, inception, and norm(ality). Less an old man who looks at the decay, the absconding, and disappearance of what there is – and thereby at its constitution – than an old man who worships the form of what “there is,” democratically framed practices and their material constitution, that is their linguistic addressability and explicability. This amounts to putting an emphasis on the given form of rationality, which forces us to agree democratically, even when or if we disagree. Opposition can thus only amount to the content and never touch, affect, or reach the form of rationality as such, a form that is impossible to explode, transform, or contradict. In this sense, all opposition remains without greater interest; one might say it is merely ontic. More profoundly, we can and must trust one another. For the rational is the actual, which here means that we ought not to worry about transforming that which can never be inconsistent or transformed anyhow; that is the natural frame and reasonable space of human rationality. Even if the world does not seem rational, rationality is qua form naturally unproblematic. The novel geriatric Hegelians thus found new means of defending the age-old form of human rationality in times of inexistent political opposition. Freedom – as well as thinking –

is turned into a natural component of human being. We here encounter a human nature that is naturalized. Freedom belongs to our nature, we are endowed with it, even though it might need cultivation and disciplining.<sup>29</sup>

The neo-geriatric Hegelians read Hegel as a thinker who elucidates the theoretical and practical realization of this natural human life form. This rendering sheds a new and different light on even previously abhorred concepts; for example, on that of absolute knowing. Absolute Knowing, previously one of the most problematic of all of Hegel's monstrous concepts, is then, for example, taken to give us an insight into our own nature because of which we cannot avoid reaching for explanations that exceed our natural capacities (i.e. we are inclined to bad metaphysical explanations) and take us beyond what appears reasonable. But with Absolute Knowing we understand this striving as part of our own nature and we can take it with a sovereign, self-distancing irony. The overcoming of metaphysical Hegelianism then consists in the insight into the anthropological or transcendental unavoidability of bad metaphysics. It is just – qua form of rationality – in our nature. By creating this transparency, we always know what we do when we do what we cannot know anything about. And knowing our own nature and thereby knowing the nature of knowing and thus rationality (this is then Absolute Knowing), we can then ironically understand that knowing what knowledge is does not produce all-encompassing practical effects. We rather learn not to take what we cannot avoid all-too seriously. This insight into our nature ironically allows us to distance ourselves from what we can never truly get away from. It is like a contradiction whose effectivity is at the same time suspended, a tamed contradiction. But already the thirty-one-year-old Hegel in his early *Habilitationsthesen*, his habilitation-theses, and already with his very first thesis, indicated, in a far-reaching non-Aristotelian vein, that “contradiction is the rule of the true; non-contradiction is the rule of the false.”<sup>30</sup> No truth without contradiction! This seems to open a quite different perspective.

Truth is always the truth of a contradiction, and there would be no truth without contradiction; contradiction is thus an index of truth, but it must also mean that truth does not simply abolish (or moderate) contradiction (as it would otherwise abolish itself). This is to say that if truth is the truth of contradiction that truth can face contradiction, i.e., opposition and adversaries without being necessarily less true. Truth in this sense can be one-sided without being any less true. This is true, even though or especially because it seems contradictory. In this sense Hegel claims in his *Philosophy of History* – but this is a claim one will find repeated throughout his oeuvre – that “the true antithesis that Spirit can have, is itself spiritual: viz., its inherent heterogeneity [*Fremdartigkeit*], through which alone it acquires the power of realizing itself as Spirit.”<sup>31</sup> Only by struggling with itself within itself, by struggling being itself, with being a stranger to itself, spirit is truly what it is. Spirit is a foreigner, it is (an) alien. *L'esprit est un autre*, to modify Rimbaud, and *this* is its nature. It is otherness, (an) alien(ation) in interiority.

At this point we can again highlight crucial characteristics of the contemporary version of the naturalized Hegel. Even though this version has been produced and generated by acts of freedom that are materialized within it, the novel geriatric Hegelians assume that freedom is a natural property of human beings. We here get a Hegel who thinks through the ways in which this natural form and property is made real in the world. In this sense, the present return of Hegel is linked to the fabrication of a newly geriatric Hegel, who is supposed to overcome previous metaphysical opposition, even that between nature and spirit or culture, by emphasizing the nature, the naturality of spirit. This raises the questions of what Hegel has to say not only about the nature of spirit, but about the nature in and of such naturalism in general. Why? Because the concept of nature that is invested here might easily bring back the danger of all kinds of neo-essentialism. This seems to be even more the case, because the naturalization of Hegel involves a concept of nature that does seem to exclude inner inconsistency, incoherence, instability. It seems to refer us back to a (form of) nature without contradiction and opposition; a formally harmonious nature.



Yet, the systematic requirement that emerges here is thus that one must adequately and conceptually elaborate how human nature is related, distinguished from, or ultimately identical with nature in general, otherwise one risks unwillingly falling into one of the just-mentioned options. The present chapter will undertake an examination of crucial components of what Hegel is talking about when he is talking about nature. This will also allow us to see more clearly what is at stake and problematic with the contemporary attempts to naturalize Hegel.

The present examination will be mindful of and take as its starting point Adorno's twofold observation regarding Hegel's oeuvre; namely, that in it "nothing can be understood in isolation, everything is to be understood only in the context of the whole," yet at the same time this can produce the strange irritation that "Hegel's philosophy teems with examples of equivocation." In it the same concept is used in different contexts, whereby Hegel's thought "suspends the identity of a concept as a criterion for truth" and demonstrates, "with logical means, the inappropriateness of static logic," ultimately "turning logic against itself" – something that Adorno calls "the dialectical salt of ...

equivocations."<sup>32</sup> What follows is an attempt to examine one grain of dialectical salt, notably Hegel's concept of nature. This examination will show in which precise way this concept in Hegel is determinately turned against itself. Hegel's conceptual strategy has often been to employ highly charged traditional concepts in such a way that through their very over-endorsement they are forced to transform and mean something different (his use of the concept of teleology for example, makes this point in a pertinent way, notably post factum). Yet, what follows is not only – even though on appearance mainly – a reading of an isolated concept in and of Hegel. This exercise takes place in a specific historical conjuncture, which is not only that of the novel geriatric Hegelians, but one in which the very concept of nature has recently also made a surprising return and new career. Returning to Hegel's concept of nature thus not only promises to enable us to lift the veil of new old Hegelian naturalism (to see that nothing is behind it except what we put there ourselves), but also to identify the

contemporary significance of this very concept for the present conjuncture.

## **Nature's Compulsion to Return**

Nature found its way back to the philosophical center stage. It may never have been gone entirely and never have completely retired from philosophy before, but its status in and for the philosophy of the twentieth century has been quite peculiar. Since therein it almost appeared either criticized as a problematic and often ideological concept (because of the things, for example, justified on the basis of human "nature"), or strangely marginalized and compartmentalized, such that it was only dealt with in one specific branch of philosophy. Grand (and speculative) philosophies of nature seemed almost impossible, at least if they were not ultimately ontologies (that only for this very reason would have included a concept of nature). Philosophies of nature appeared for quite some time as if they were an outmoded, impossible, slightly ridiculous genre of thought from a previous time, even the branches of and in philosophy that sought to address concepts of nature ultimately did not do this in the form of philosophies of nature, but as philosophies of (the) science(s of nature). Nature was thereby in a broad sense identified with the reign of laws, but nature in itself, so to speak, disappeared from philosophy.

Yet, this situation changed. Nature returned to the forefront of many if not most contemporary discussions, including those within philosophy. This entails far-reaching debates that concern the present and future of mankind and more broadly of life on this planet (and sometimes even beyond), the politico-economic organization and reproduction of human society (due to its dependence on or interdependence with nature), including pressing ecological discussions that may even force us to reconceptualize what constitutes a natural and/or cultural, and therefore an agent in general. Nature returned and it seemed to have done so because it was forced to show itself, since we started to change its nature, which then started to affect our relation to it. This obviously does not stand in any direct confrontation with or contradiction to the



endeavors of the natural sciences, but it is also not directly reducible to them. In this vein and for this reason, it has recently been claimed that it is high time, in a formulation that puns Montesquieu, to write “another *Spirit of the Laws of Nature*,” because we are undergoing “a *profound mutation in our relation to the world*.”<sup>33</sup> This does lead to a renewal of existing constitutions of governments and a novel understanding of the separation of powers, liberating nature and its natural inhabitants from its previously assigned position. Nature has returned to the front row because it started to become a problem. It returned as much as we returned to it when it became clear that we can no longer see ourselves as sitting as though in a movie theatre, where we are witnessing natural catastrophes from a safe distance. Rather, we are as directly affected by them as we are responsible for them in ways that we do not even comprehend. We had to realize that we are living in or on a vehicle where no one seems to be in or even be able to identify the driver’s seat. What has been described as spaceship earth does not come with a manual and does not appear to have a steering wheel. Nature returned and revealed to us that our relationship looks effectively quite different from what we might have presumed beforehand. This is why the nowadays prominent concept of the Anthropocene “only makes sense within an apocalyptic logical framework,”<sup>34</sup> wherein we are experiencing a specific transformative revelation that pertains to our conception of and thereby to our relation with nature.<sup>35</sup>

Nature’s return, and herein different from that of Hegel, is therefore *firstly* the expression of a basic problem, which fundamentally has to do with our understanding of it. But thereby it confronts us with a particular paradox: nature functions as a normative concept and provides a measure for our practices – this is a thesis one already finds in thinkers like Aristotle or Epicurus, but it now does so in a new way – neither by being easily decipherable, nor by allowing for any romantic melancholic desire of an amalgamating return to a lifestyle of natural harmony (where one finds in nature the latent knowledge of one’s basic needs, desires, and wishes). Nature is here and now taken to be

normative, but its norms are difficult to grasp. Its *lex* is not easily legible. Whereas in its original Greek sense, as John Sallis remarked, where nature was linked to the verb to grow and thus shows organic growth of our understanding of it, today it seems there is a “withdrawal of the sense of nature,” which “is replicated at the more abstract level by the uncertainty about the very meaning of the word.”<sup>36</sup> What do we refer to when we refer to nature? This question indicates an essential part of the problem.

Already the semantic extension of the word is uncertain. Does it, for example, include the sky, other planets, the galaxy, the universe? It seems almost all-encompassing, yet it also stops somewhere. Not all of culture is just more nature. But where does it stop? With thought or language? Even though there is a general disorientation about the norms of nature and thereby about nature, something can be derived from its return. Namely, that nature is essentially something that can return and that returns. Nature is marked by a compulsion to return. Not only do the seasons return as well as the sun and the night every day (and animals follow at least the former), nature also returns to every site that culture and humans abandon and this, even at the end, includes every individual human body. When nature again claimed its position on the center stage of many contemporary debates, not only came to the fore the strange intimacy, fragility, and destructiveness of the “nature–society intersection”<sup>37</sup> that determines all contemporary life-forms, it also forced everyone to consider revisiting and be troubled by what we mean when we say “nature.”

There is *secondly* also a return of nature in and to contemporary philosophy. What is specific for this very return is its form: nature returned here in the guise of nature-philosophy. Its contemporary versions, in all their diversity, almost all share at least one common feature, namely that they are all trying to overcome or undo the so-called Kantian break in philosophy. This commonality is significant, because it does have immediate implications for the meaning of nature in contemporary nature-philosophy. If the general return of nature indicates a return to an opaque type of normativity, nature-

philosophy's anti-Kantian agenda can be better understood. Since the Kantian tradition, the link between nature and normativity has been severed, because the former is rather seen as the realm of the anti-normative.

Here things get slightly more complicated. Since for Kant the normative is what makes an exception to nature. This obviously raises the question of whether the naturalization of Hegel (and freedom) that is characteristic for the novel geriatric Hegelianism is part of the same conjuncture or not. For, is to take the form of rationality and freedom to be a natural given for human beings (of a certain age) a return to nature or not? It seems that if one attempts to undo things and start anew, from the beginning, there is a temptation, or it might even be a necessity, to start with and return to nature. The renewal of spirit might need to pass through nature, since there sometimes appears to be a "mutual dependence of spirit and nature."<sup>38</sup> Not only does what we take to be nature depend on what we conceive of as being fundamentally and genuinely spirit, but the same certainly holds and more profoundly the other way around, since it is only in and through nature that spirit is to "be able to manifest itself."<sup>39</sup> But if one's renewal attempt concerns not some shape of spirit, but were to concern philosophy itself, the philosophy of nature seems the almost immediately inviting option. To begin anew, with philosophy, after Kant – and Kant here stands for everything that went wrong in Western thought vis-à-vis the ways in which we conceive of ourselves, of the world and of nature – might naturally lead into nature-philosophy, because, at its very beginning, philosophy began to think in close connection to nature. And even Hegel confirms that there is an intimate link between nature and philosophy right at the beginning of philosophy.

## **Philosophy Begins. The (Eight) Dialectics of Nature**

Greek philosophy – with which, for Hegel, philosophy proper begins – commences by relating in a specific way to what precedes it. What precedes it is "so-called Oriental"<sup>40</sup> philosophy. The latter is a form of

philosophy that is not yet differentiated or emancipated from religion. The form of religion that thereby determines it appears as what Hegel calls natural religion or "Nature Religion."<sup>41</sup> In natural religion, spirit is initially in an "unadulterated, undisturbed unity"<sup>42</sup> with nature, which then develops into spirit, identifying something divine manifesting in nature. For Hegel, oriental philosophy stands in a structurally comparable relationship to natural religion in the way that in natural religion spirit stands to nature. Oriental philosophy, in short, is the historical shape in which there is "the natural unity between the spiritual and the natural."<sup>43</sup> Philosophy proper begins with an act of denaturalization, with a break away from the natural unity of the spiritual and the natural. Now, the unity of the spiritual and the natural has itself turned spiritual. How does this denaturalization manifest? Here "natural existence has no further value for itself, in its existing shapes,"<sup>44</sup> but is now rather conceived as "the mere expression of spirit shining through."<sup>45</sup> Philosophy begins when spirit is able to see the shine of spirit in nature. It establishes a spiritual unity, even though it is still very different from what will later become the principle of the modern world, notably the "extreme of abstract subjectivity," "the pure formalism."<sup>46</sup> Philosophy begins by beginning to *think* the unity of spirit and nature. By beginning to think the unity of spirit and nature, this unity is denaturalized and this is the beginning of thinking and hence of spirit. Philosophy is thus per se, by definition and from its very beginning, for Hegel, a practice of denaturalization.

But this does not happen all at once, which is at the same time why Hegel's philosophical history of philosophy "commences with the Greeks and from the natural philosophy of the Ionic school,"<sup>47</sup> and also why "these thoughts are scarcely worth observation ..., since they are not yet proper thoughts, neither being in the form or determination of thought, but in that of naturalness."<sup>48</sup> Philosophy begins by beginning to denaturalize the unity of spirit and nature. But when it starts to think it, it thinks in such a natural form and mode that thought here is barely thinking anything. Philosophy begins to denaturalize the unity of spirit

and nature, but at the beginning it constantly relies on a natural form to do so. This means that nature is there at the beginning, and nature-philosophy is thus the beginning of philosophy. Nature-philosophy is for Hegel the natural form and mode in which philosophy begins to think, without thinking properly yet. Therefore, it can in the beginning look as if it is not beginning, not philosophy, but something else; for example, physics.<sup>49</sup> But even though what looks as if it is not philosophy yet, is the beginning of philosophy – that one should not trust one's eyes and first impressions any longer, is a sign one is dealing with a practice of denaturalization even at its very beginning. This means that not only does spirit see in nature more than just nature, but even in the natural forms and ways in which spirit is articulating itself, there is more than there appears to be. Philosophy begins without looking like philosophy in search of a form for and determination of denaturalization proper. But, even though philosophy begins not directly as itself and thereby in the form of physical thoughts, this does obviously not mean that all nature-philosophy is and must necessarily be understood as an attempt to recommence philosophy. This difference must clearly manifest in different significations of the signifier "nature." It is thus instructive here to pass through a series of dialectical relationships that can be identified as a frame for determining this very concept. They have been referred to as "the eight dialectics of the concept of nature."<sup>50</sup>

Alain Badiou, who coined this dialectical number, has identified the first as dialectic between nature and being. It manifests in Lucretius' famous poem *The Nature of Things* or *De Natura Rerum*, wherein nature signifies that which really makes a thing into what it is – in line with Virgil's claim that "fortunate, who was able to know the causes of things."<sup>51</sup> What a thing really is, is distinct from what it seems to be. "Nature" thus names the being of a thing. Think of Heidegger for whom *physis* was the "basic Greek word [*Grundwort*] ... customarily translated as 'nature,'"<sup>52</sup> yet did therein not simply name a certain region of being, but "the bursting forth ..., the gift"<sup>53</sup> of being. Nature is the way in which being is given to us. But – and this is where the dialectics comes

to the fore – if nature is being what is the nature of nature? One way to understand this question is that it asks not about the being, but about the essence of nature. This is the second dialectic. There is no nature that would not manifest externally. So, “nature is the exhibition of the essence.”<sup>54</sup> This means that the essence of nature is external and thereby – in a Hegelian sense – one has an insight into the “naturalness of essence itself,” namely that it is essentially external. This does not mean that nature is essence, but rather that nature is the exhibition of essence and thereby the way – the inner – essence shows itself. Nature is thereby “this oscillation between interiority and exteriority, between the intimacy of the essence, what the thing really is, and what the thing shows itself to be ... nature is at the same time essence and the visibility of the essence.”<sup>55</sup> Nature is thus the sensuous exhibition of essence. It is what there is as the sensuous. This is also what nature, for example, was often taken to be in the domain of the science of nature – the totality of the sensuous. This assumption also enables nature’s (romantic) poetizability: “nature is a lake, a valley, a deep forest.”<sup>56</sup> But is there more to nature than sensuous appearance and what distinguishes the two? These questions are part of the third dialectic.

If nature is identified with sensuousness and thereby with the externality of (our) essence, this immediately challenges its intelligibility. Nature, when identified with sensuousness, becomes an “opaque exteriority, an exteriority without immanent principle of intelligibility.”<sup>57</sup> It is thereby so external that it does not follow any immanent principle of coherence. This can lend itself to an interpretation of nature being without inner sense, without meaning, fundamentally indifferent (also to the existence of human beings). But – and this the fourth dialectic – this raises the question from which standpoint one can make this claim about nature – is it itself a position within the indifference of nature or exempted from it? There is thus the question of the relation of nature to totality: nature is as broad and indifferent as the cosmos or the universe, but there must be a standpoint from which to grasp its nature. This raises the question from which perspective one can articulate and grasp this totality – is nature



grasping itself or not? The dialectical intricacy here is that “if nature is the totality, nature as totality does not show itself in the totality. This is to say that there is something non-natural in nature,” simply because nature as totality does not show itself within the totality that it is – another way of putting it is that nature is a concept. Therefore, if nature is conceived of as totality it “can either be considered dialectically or productively. These are the two orientations from the point of view of the concept of nature.”<sup>58</sup> This is to say, Hegel or Spinoza – there is a choice (and thus more than nature).

This means that there is a fifth dialectic, namely that of nature and freedom. Since freedom is often understood as what goes against and thus as anti-nature (the freedom of God for example manifests in miracles that are not explainable by recourse to nature). Freedom as suspension of nature then becomes the source of sense and meaning (for example in Pascal, Malebranche, Kant, or Sartre). But if there is a disjunction between nature and freedom, the question emerges as to how freedom emerged from nature, if it has not always been there already. This leads into the (sixth) dialectic of nature and mankind. For, if humanity can be considered both free and natural, the question is how an exception to the laws of nature, i.e. freedom, originates in nature. “If there is a naturalness of freedom, this will bring back the question of how it is included in the totality of nature”<sup>59</sup> and what this means for the life and nature of mankind. Which is where the seventh dialectic of nature and the superhuman [*Übermensch*] comes in, which has been famously announced and articulated by Nietzsche. The superhuman is the human who dares to follow its own nature, which drives it to overcome itself, not simply to abolish itself, but to effectively become God. This, in turn, leads to the eighth and final dialectic, of nature and God, since the moment the overcoming of the human in the superhuman leads to the latter becoming God, we end by identifying nature and God, *deus sive natura*. Nature here is just another name for God. Or is God just the creator of nature, as Hegel would have indicated? Is she what grounds all the dialectical and conceptual linkages in the first place?

This map of the dialectics of nature can provide an orientational framing that will now facilitate entering the Hegelian cosmos. It will also help to detect in what way nature in Hegel is not only, as Emerson once put it, “all that is separate from us, all that Philosophy distinguishes as *not me*,”<sup>60</sup> but how it is peculiarly more and less. As many other of his concepts, Hegel’s concept of nature has had a strange career. It had been widely either neglected or ridiculed and its press was never great to begin with.<sup>61</sup> His philosophy of nature would, if there were a competition, certainly be one of the parts of his system that were the least valued since its very conception. It was so problematic that almost any study of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature*, published in the last thirty or more years, had to start with an acknowledgment of the level of discredit it had received.<sup>62</sup> It was so bad – as William Maker paradigmatically claimed over twenty years ago, “nowadays nothing is more dead than Hegel’s philosophy of nature,”<sup>63</sup> – and the only way to start making it better, was to accept and admit how bad it was. But, within the overall conjuncture of philosophies of nature returning, and against the background of the attempted novel geriatric naturalization of Hegel, the interest in the latter’s conception of nature started, may one dare say, to grow. There has been a noticeable increase, even though still comparatively small, in the number of investigations that address aspects of Hegel’s philosophy of nature. These considered inter alia how Hegel accounts for spirit’s emergence from nature and how spirit conceives of nature through and in the form of a philosophy of (the science of) nature.

The present chapter will draw on some of this work and, by seeking to understand in what sense precisely the concept of nature entails the articulation of “a necessary condition of possibility for the coming-to-be of full-fledged subjectivity,”<sup>64</sup> it will examine crucial aspects of Hegel’s concept of nature. It will thereby reconstruct in what sense this very concept allows us to articulate specific requirements for a philosophical robust conception of nature. Drawing on a selection of biographical and anecdotal, pedagogical and systematic, i.e. heterogenous, material, and thereby, as will become clear subsequently,



by following the internal structure of the concept of nature itself, the main aim here is to reconstruct constitutive elements of Hegel's concept of nature in its different specific dialectical settings – as a middle term between logic and spirit, which can equally be regarded as the first term that builds the basis for the other two as well as the last term. For nature holds, in Adorno's words, "the idea that the a priori is also the a posteriori,"<sup>65</sup> and what follows is an attempt to elucidate this very claim. This elaboration will indicate what kind of problems Hegel seeks to avoid with his concept of nature, and will indicate why it is crucial for any contemporary philosophy of nature not to regress behind Hegel's achievement; and it will show how Hegel's philosophical concept of nature, because it is both philosophical and a concept, implies a specific form of denaturalization – as philosophy, as we have seen, always does. The following will thus attempt to unfold a denaturalized – or desubstantialized – concept of nature that will enable us to see more clearly the problems with all attempts to naturalize, not only Hegel but even nature. The wager is that such a multiply dialectical concept of nature proves highly relevant and pertinent for contemporary discussions (around all the reasons for and behind the return of and to nature).

## **Falling For ...**

Why do we need to think of nature at all? Would it not also be possible to simply ignore it, not care about it? This might at first sight appear to be a rather idiotic question. But how does one precisely determine and understand the modality that connects thought and nature? Is the thought of nature necessary and, thereby, nature a concept that thought cannot *not* have? If this may be so, is it because otherwise thought would not adequately understand itself (as in: its own nature)? We might be unavoidably tempted to naturalize thinking when we do not think (the) nature (of thinking and as such). But what would thought think when it thinks nature if nature is not thought – because it is nature – even though it is thought – because it is thought? In Hegel, nature crops up from early on and in the most central places of his system of absolute idealism. So central that Frederick C. Beiser could

write in modifying Plato: "Above the portals of the academy of absolute idealism there is written the inscription '*Let no one enter who has not studied Naturphilosophie.*'"<sup>66</sup> But why is that so? Before the times of absolute idealism – Beiser means Schelling and Hegel –, Kant was able to state in his 1786 *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, in the very first sentence: "the word nature ... taken simply in its *formal* meaning ... means the inner principle of all that belongs to the existence of a thing" – recall the previously mentioned dialectics of nature and being and essence; but "nature is also taken otherwise in its *material* meaning, not as constitution, but as the sum total of things, insofar as they can be *objects of our senses*, and thus as all of experience"<sup>67</sup> – recall the dialectics of nature and sensuousness and totality. Do we need to think nature because at one point we are forced to conceive of the sum total of our experiences and the inner principle of all things? Hegel will give this a different twist. He endorses the view that thinking cannot but generate the concept of nature as that which is thought thinking itself but in the form of otherness. This is to say that thinking, when it seeks to understand itself, does so, obviously, by means of thinking. Thereby it starts to create an idea of thinking. But it cannot but also generate an idea of what the conditions and what the result of thinking are, where thought emerges from and what it cannot but be also related to.

In and through nature, we then might be able to think what occurs at and as the end of thought as that which it must take and think as its own presupposition, as a condition of its own beginning, to conceive of itself properly. But is this not precisely the cliché of the powers of the creative narcissism of an absolute idealist who finds spirit even where there is none and thereby ultimately – whatever this then means precisely – sublates everything that is other than itself? Does to think nature not thereby in advance mean not to think, never to think nature as such, in itself, but only for us? Is then nature just spirit's slightly tainted mirror? But if – as we will see – nature is what unavoidably and prominently returns at the very end of thought's attempt to grasp itself, thought on some level cannot stop thinking about nature, does nature's return – yet again! – not also point toward another form of relating

thinking and nature? Hegel will demonstrate that on the peak of thought creatively realizing an appropriate form in which it thinks itself – namely in the form of creatively thinking the form of thinking –, nature returns as something that cannot simply be derived from thought. Rather it returns after thinking seems to have done all it could do. As if nature occurred at the point of or as exhaustion of thought. But does Hegel's concept entail such an exorcism of thought by itself and what would this effectively mean and amount to?

As is well documented, Hegel engaged almost throughout his life with nature, even though his actual publications on natural matter(s) are effectively quite limited and he never published a book on the philosophy of nature, which would not have been purposed in advance as being teaching material for his university courses.<sup>68</sup> Some of his engagements with natural matters have even acquired the status of paradigmatic anecdotes, which are supposed to evidence Hegel's ridiculous views on and treatment of nature as well as of the natural sciences. One of these stories concerns his early habilitations treatise (*"Dissertatio philosophica de Orbitis Planetarum"*).<sup>69</sup> The anecdote is that Hegel is supposed to have argued a priori that there can be no other planet between the fourth and fifth planet of our solar system (Mars and Jupiter). But on January 1, 1801, a few months before Hegel came up with his deduction, an astronomer (Giuseppe Piazzi) proved the existence of the very thing that Hegel claimed impossible. The embarrassment of the philosopher's ideas about nature when confronted with real scientific facts, is obviously what this anecdote was supposed to express (even though this is rather problematic).<sup>70</sup> It is here that Hegel's – again anecdotal and – infamous dictum (also about nature) that if the facts do not comply with the theory, it is "even worse for the facts" appears at first sight to be an even worse fact for Hegel.<sup>71</sup> He appears to be a kind of modern Thales. But, different from his ancient predecessor, he did not fall into the (metaphorical) well while looking at the stars, and because he was so riveted by nature. Rather the opposite. He made himself into a laughing matter precisely because he was not looking at matter, namely nature properly, but tried

to dictate its laws from the outside. Yet, Hegel's comment on the Thales anecdote might already point toward a possible rebuttal:

the people laugh at such things and boast that philosophers cannot tell them about such things; but they do not understand that philosophers laugh at them, for they do not fall into a ditch just because they lie in one for all time, and because they cannot see what exists above them.<sup>72</sup>

When a philosophy of nature makes people anecdotally laugh, this is here Hegel's point, the laughter might be the symptom of a more profound disorientation. About where the ditch is – was there not a fall that still determines our entire existence, according to some? –, about what the laughing matter really is and ultimately even about what laughter is. Philosophy proves itself here again to be denaturalizing, looking if not for a way out then at least for another perspective on the ditch, and thereby denaturalizes even the natural ways in which we behave, think, or laugh.

### **... and Cresting Nature**

There is yet another well-known anecdote, that dates back even earlier but that leads us more directly to examine Hegel's relation to nature. In 1796, Hegel took a trip to the Bernese Alps. His friends dragged him there, "in order to become aware of, and to admire the stunning beauty of the scenery there."<sup>73</sup> Hegel writes a diary. He notes that when passing the Lauterbrunnen valley "the height of the cliff from which it [the creek] cascades has on its own something great, the Staubbach [the creek] rather not." The spray the creek produces "has something quaint," but one does not see in it "a power, a great force, so that the thought of the coercion, of *the must* [*das Muß*] of nature remains aloof." Rather, what Hegel identifies as "the animate, in that which permanently dissolves [*immer sich Auflösende*], bursts apart [*Auseinanderspringende*]" of the creek cascading down the mountain is "the image of a free play."<sup>74</sup> Nature removes the idea of necessity, but creates an image linked to the "gracious, unconstrained, free downplay

[*Niederspielen*] of the spray.”<sup>75</sup> The combination of the unmoved and unmoving great cliff and the lively small stream endlessly and freely crashing, rushing, and dying down in a pile of inconsistent spray creates the image of a free play because therein manifests the very freedom of this connection of stone and water, of the unmoved and the moving, the dead and the somehow animate. It is this concatenation that evaporates – as if into spray – the idea that there is anything necessary in this very concatenation. Nature thus, for the early Hegel, because of its material composition, where there manifests no necessity, evaporates into spray the idea of necessary connections and inferences. Nature is not at all simply the realm of necessity, as it was so often represented.

In view of the glacier of Grindelwald, Hegel noted that one does not see “anything of further interest” in the gigantic masses. There is no need for hermeneutic suspicion or deconstructive analysis. Looking at nature demands for any spirited being “a *new mode of seeing*, which gives *no new occupation to spirit* other than that it notices that it is in the strongest heat of the summer so close to the masses of ice.”<sup>76</sup> It takes a new mode of seeing, to see that nature can combine things in a way that does not exhibit any kind of necessity, barely makes any sense and can even generate apparent inconsistency. This new mode of seeing is a mode that avoids seeing necessity and consistency where there is none. It is just seeing what is there in its non-necessity and non-sense and nothing else. This implies not to see what is not there, and thus to see that what there is, is to see simply what there is to see. Nature is what it appears to be. There is no deeper meaning or anything else behind it. Hegel adds to this, after leaving Guttannen, another local village, that “the Aar [the river] does make some splendid waterfalls, crushing down with tremendous power.” And when traversing a bridge “on which one is moistened by the dust” of water, yet can get a good look at the waves of the river, he notes that “nowhere else do we obtain such a pure concept of the must [*vom Müssen*] of nature”<sup>77</sup> There is no must [*Muß*], but a pure need, a must-ing [*Müssen*] of nature and thus a dialectics of *Muß* and *Müssen*.<sup>78</sup> It has immense powers that push forward and out of it; they create and spill over; this is what it must do. Yet, there is no

necessity and thus no (structuring) must within it. Nature needs and has to (produce, generate, create, destroy, etc.), but is without necessity. Nature is like a Kantian subject that has some pure concept of duty, but one that is so empty that there is nothing aligning and bringing together the productions except that they are produced. In nature we thus encounter a pure need – it must do it – without necessity – there is nothing determining how, in what way, if consistent or not –, *ein Müssen ohne Muß*.

Such necessity without necessity becomes particularly manifest in the shapes of the mountains that have been formed by massive natural forces over almost endless periods of time but which exhibit no purpose or telos whatsoever: *“I doubt whether here even the most faithful theologian would dare to attribute to nature itself in these mountains the purpose of usability to men.”*<sup>79</sup> Not even (physical-) theology (that identifies and justifies God’s existence from nature’s creations) allows us to see purpose in such manifestations of nature, so that Hegel seems to suggest: if you want to free someone from (especially physical-) theological beliefs (about nature), just take her to the Alps. There is obviously no purpose, no sense, no usability to the mountain and its shape. Nature can be so unusable that it materializes and indicates in and through its own material appearance its utter purposelessness to men. The message is that there is no message and hence the medium, which is none, is again the message, which is therefore also none. Looking at the shapes of mountains with the new mode of seeing, spirit (and Hegel) sees no aim or end. One sees only meaningless and uselessness, one sees that there is nothing to see. Therefore, Hegel remarks consistently that “neither the eye nor the imagination finds in these formless masses any point on which the former could rest with pleasure or on which the latter could find entertainment or play.”<sup>80</sup> The imagination and even our visual sense are almost suspended, because they do find nothing that would keep them alive or interested. The same holds for reason, which “finds in the thought of duration or this way of sublimity ... nothing that impresses it ... the sight of this eternal dead masses gave me nothing but the



monotonous and, in its length, tedious [*in der Länge langweilige*] idea: *it is so* [*es ist so*].”<sup>81</sup>

The only thing that there is to think in the formless masses of the mountains, the only thing that nature gives us to think is that there is nothing to think in it. And even this thought has a temporality of its own. To think it for too long makes it boring. It is not a deep thought. There is no depth attached to it or to which it could refer. With nature, one can only think what is in plain sight anyhow and hence should only take seriously what the eyes can see. Nature is the identity of being and appearance within which there is nothing else to think than what appears. What is there to think in its pure superficiality is the thought specific to the type of a *Müssen ohne Muß*, of need without necessity. Hegel will remain faithful to this position in his later life, when for example he notes that “for nature on the surface of which contingency has, so to speak, its free sway, which should also be recognized ... without the pretension ... of intending to find in it an instance of being able to be only so and not otherwise.”<sup>82</sup> There is a fundamental “it is like this simply because it is like this” in nature. It is in this sense that one can say it is contingent. What Hegel later scorns is in the sphere of spirit, to accept and interpret determinations as “unreasonable/opaque fate [*unverstandenes Geschick*]: *It is so* [*Es ist so*],” is precisely the point he makes about nature, it is nature’s point. Nature is a *Geschick* – one can immediately think of a Heideggerian reading starting from here –, it is fortune, but one that is constitutively not understood (*unverstanden*), not because it is misunderstood – even though it sometimes is – but because there is nothing in it to understand. We might qualify it as *Unverstand*, not as ignorance or stupidity, but as unreason (or ununderstanding), which does not simply mark the negation of reason, but the absence of it. But this does not turn it into a dark, deep, and ununderstandable mystery. It is fully understood when it is understood that there is nothing to understand, when its unreason is comprehended in thought. The early and pre-philosophical, anecdotal concept of nature one can formulate here is that nature is a material manifestation of unreason, wherein it is important only to think that there is nothing to think in it, but where it is of equal importance not to

identify this as a deep thought, as there is no such depth in the appearance or thought of nature.

## **From Nature as Fragment to the System-Fragment**

In 1800, Hegel attempts to write a system of which only a fragment survived. Therein one also finds an account of nature, of “life ... as nature.” An apparently fragmented account. Hegel classifies it therein as “an infinitely finite, an unrestricted restrictedness.”<sup>83</sup> How is nature infinitely finite? By manifesting in and producing infinitely many ways in which it is finite. Infinitely many finite species, infinitely many finite members of the species, infinitely many variations within a finite number of species. That there are, as he later notes, “some sixty species of parrots, one hundred and thirty-seven species of veronica, and so on”<sup>84</sup> indicates that nature, however infinite it may inherently be, appears to us in random and finite ways. For Hegel, nature generates infinitely many finite manifestations and differences, infinitely many ways on how to be finite. How is nature unrestrictedly restricted? By being restricted in ever new ways, in never restricting the ways in which it finds novel restrictions. Finding ever new forms of what living creatures cannot do, creatively generating new limitations, new ways of how species and members of a species disappear or end. But also if nature is thus inherently infinite, its infinity always appears in finite forms. If nature is an infinite totality, this very totality does not appear as infinite within itself. Everything natural in this precise sense is ultimately finite, even though nature is infinite. Nature’s infinity does not appear (in nature) but only when nature is represented as an endless list of finite things on which there is no nature. In different terms, in nature there is an infinity of quantity and not quality. At this point, Hegel adds a further qualification, namely that “nature is not itself life, but only a life crystallized by reflection.”<sup>85</sup>

Nature is not itself life. This seems a trivial observation, since not everything – recall Hegel on the rocks of the Alps – in nature is alive. Even though nature constitutively entails life, life in nature is not properly alive. Why not? Because life in nature is determined by nature



and thus as nature is not fully alive, life therein is also not fully alive. There is thus something that is not alive in natural life, which is why there is death in it. The reason for this is “this separation of the finite and the infinite ... in nature.”<sup>86</sup> Life in nature, natural life, is one that knows an infinite diversity, but in each instance is nevertheless separated from its inner infinity, so it is a constitutively finite, finitized life. It manifests effectively “an infinity of living beings,”<sup>87</sup> but this infinity is not infinite in the form of its living manifestation. Therefore, life’s infinity is separated from itself. Life existing as natural life is a life relying on a separation of life into life and death. This is what it means that it exists in finitized form – life in nature appears as infinitely repeated death. Infinity finitized, a life that is separated from itself, is what Hegel sees as a determining feature of life as nature, as natural life in 1800. In difference to such finite life, Hegel also identifies “infinite life” which “we may call ... a spirit.”<sup>88</sup> So, life separates into a life that is separated and into a life that is not separated from its own infinity. Nature and spirit are the separations of life that are infinitely united in spirit. Spiritual life is infinite(ly infinite) and natural life is finite(ly infinite), but spiritual life is thereby not separated from natural life in the same way in which natural life is separated from itself. Otherwise, we would never leave natural life. This is why life as such and in itself is not only, not per se natural for Hegel. Not all life is finite. Nature is the capacity to finitize life. It is the sphere of separation of the infinite from itself and thereby introduces natural determinations into it. Nature naturalizes life.

A finitized infinity is an infinity that is unable to get a proper hold of itself, that misses itself, that does not appear to itself (and is thus not self-conscious). This is why an infinite life, the life of the infinite, i.e. spirit, cannot simply be a counter-nature but must be another way of dealing with the separation that is natural life; a way whereby the infinite does not lose itself within its manifestations. Spiritual life is not simply separated from natural life, but emerges within natural life as something that relates differently to the infinity of which it is one of the manifestations. Life brings together spirit and nature, spiritual life and

natural life, that which is infinitely related to itself and that which is infinitely separated from itself, such that life is the binding of binding and unbinding, or in another translation, “the union of union and non-union” [*Verbindung der Verbindung und der Nichtverbindung*].”<sup>89</sup> Life binds what binds and unbinds such that it forms a constitutive un-relation between the two, and in this sense it is infinite (*unendlich*). Nature and natural life are the life and the infinite in the form of separation that is not simply a negation of life and infinity but the form in which it exists – or: ex-ists – externally. Nature is, per form, infinity existing outside of itself, in exile, in existence. Nature is as if an external fragment of infinity, but this only becomes clear when in nature there emerges another type of relation between the infinity of life and its material manifestation, which stands in a peculiar un-relation to nature.

## **Nature in Jena (as Substance but also ...)**

It is well known that during his years in Jena Hegel worked continuously on developing his system.<sup>90</sup> Within it, nature plays a crucial role. The still existing fragments of his first Jena systems of 1803/04 that form part of the material for his lectures on the “system of speculative philosophy” begin with extensive elaborations on nature: Hegel moves from the terrestrial, earthly system – the concept of the earth plays an important role throughout<sup>91</sup> – to mechanics, then from chemism to physics and finally to organic life, which allows and mediates the beginning of the philosophy of spirit. Before Hegel begins the latter and at the very end of his conceptualizations of natural phenomena, he notes that “*in spirit nature exists as that which is its essence*.”<sup>92</sup> Spirit articulates nature in terms of essence. The dialectic of nature and essence is thus the way in which nature exists in spirit (for the Hegel of 1803/04). This indicates that spirit makes a claim about what nature is and nature never does the reverse. Nature does not say anything about what it is; it might even be indifferent about what it is. It just is. But spirit makes claims about what nature is, essentially. Because spirit seeks to grasp nature’s essence, it can only speak of

nature by speaking of its essence. To rephrase: there seems to be no nature for nature. Only spirit knows something that it identifies as nature because it articulates nature in terms of essence. Nature essentially exists in spirit (as the essentially determined concept of nature). This is to say that nature is a concept that nature itself does not have. Whereas spirit by means of this concept aims to ultimately even comprehend its own nature, its own essence and thus itself. Spirit employs (the concept of) nature, whereas nature does not employ either spirit or nature. Nature exists (as concept of substance) in spirit, in such a form that spirit articulates by means of the concept of nature what it (nature and spirit) essentially is.

In 1805/06, still in Jena, when Hegel has conceived of the first – still rather raw – version of his final system, it begins in and with nature(-philosophy). The system of philosophy thereby seems to be accounting for its own origin and emergence. It turns to what it was preceded by and what its material and practical conditions have been. Spirit grasps itself and its own nature only by grasping also that which does not grasp itself and precedes spirit. At this time, Hegel specifies this idea by claiming that “this determinacy of the being that isn’t there [spirit] passes into Dasein and the element of reality is the general determinacy in which spirit is as nature ...”<sup>93</sup> Here something surprising happened, which will inform many of the most difficult claims that Hegel will later make vis-à-vis the strange relation – if it is one – between spirit and nature. We moved from general claims about nature, which were grounded on a dialectic that emphasized nature as unreason different from spirit (Hegel on the rocks) to the articulation of a third term mediating spirit and nature (life is what divides into the unrelation of spirit and nature). At the end of the Jena period, we make the transition to spirit, assuming that it is the highest form of life, since it is the form of life that conceives of its own nature and essence by forming a concept of nature. But now, as Hegel states, we move from spirit back to nature, so that spirit is as nature. What does this mean? It means that there is a finite life-form that is different from all other finite life-forms, because it articulates and understands all other life-forms in terms of spirit and thus of itself. Spirit detects – maybe projects – purpose in(to)

nature, by understanding nature as its own material presupposition. "Nature" is then for spirit what the world is like when there is no spirit. Why? Because in grasping its own nature, spirit comprehends that it emerged from nature as something that stands in a peculiar relation to nature, as it appears to be different from all other forms of nature.

Spirit identifies nature as the place of its origin, and this is similar to why the system starts with a nature-philosophy. It identifies the "purposiveness of nature," which is overall a "relation of different indifferences [*verschiedenenen Gleichgültigen*],"<sup>94</sup> with its own emergence. This must and cannot but mean that nature also remains indifferent with regard to the emergence of spirit from nature. This implies that, so to speak, from the perspective of nature, nothing happened with the emergence of spirit. From the perspective of spirit, everything changed, with the emergence of spirit. Nature is now its material presupposition. But spirit – for Hegel unavoidably – denaturalizes nature and spiritualizes it. This is to say that the relationship between spirit and nature is for nature a natural one and for spirit a spiritual one. For spirit, there is no mother nature, but "nature" is spirit's concept.<sup>95</sup> It is here important to mark that this is not simply Hegel's opinion but a claim about the structure of spirit; and here one can relate this dynamic back to the naturalizing novel geriatric readings of Hegel. The stakes of the debate now become clearer. The question concerns the very status of the emergence of spirit. Does nature negate itself in spirit? Does spirit's constitutive denaturalizing feature, i.e. that spirit is a denaturalizing force, which nevertheless originates within nature, constitute itself and on its own terms also a stable nature (of and for all spirit)? This would imply that with the emergence of spirit we would get out of but also on top of nature a new, a second nature, namely that of spirit – as if ultimately what we have to think is *spiritus sive natura*. But if this were all we had to work with, the difference would ultimately be no difference, or put otherwise: we then would always look on the nature-spirit (un-)relation from the perspective of nature. To look at it from both incompatible sides and to thus take an impossible and parallaxic – or dialectical – standpoint is what, in the reading I will develop in what follows, appears to be at

stake in Hegel's account from the end of the Jena period (and potentially even before). Spirit is not yet another thing with its own independent nature but is essentially defined by the practice of denaturalization – therefore it is only what it makes of itself.

From such perspective, it becomes intelligible why nature can be taken to be the name for the material base-structure that allows for beings endowed with freedom to emerge, and why they are described in specifically negative terms. Slavoj Žižek, for example, championed the significance of Hegel's claim – from the 1805/06 *Realphilosophie* – that human beings are “the night of the world,” an “empty nothing [*leere Nichts*].”<sup>96</sup> They are not some-things that originate as another positive entity within a realm of positive entities. They are constitutively derailed, appear as literal blind spots within nature and immediately denaturalize it. Here we get another twist on the insight that there can actually be a nothing that emerges in nature in which there is nothing to think. Since in nature appears the material nothing (human being) that thinks that there is nothing to think in nature (and thereby also thinks part of itself). With the emergence of this nothing, nothing changed – as if a negation of nothing by means of nothing. Therefore, it is not boring, but important to think that there is a nothing that thinks, when there *is* an empty nothing, a determinate nothing. Such a nothing that makes a difference emerges on the basis of what Hegel calls the “caprice [*Willkür*] of nature,”<sup>97</sup> a caprice so far-reaching that it can even generate such a kind of “singularity,”<sup>98</sup> which, with one arbitrary stroke, will have changed the entirety of nature, notably by denaturalizing it.

In this sense Hegel can say that “being-there,” *Dasein*, in its utter contingency is “the element of nature in general.” In his precise formulation, he claims “*Nichts als das Dasein*”<sup>99</sup> is the element of nature. One can translate this as “nothing but the being-there” is the general element of nature, nothing but what is there or, literally, as “nothing as the being-there” is the element of nature. Nature is nothing but being-there (this is repetition of the pre-philosophical and anecdotal conception of nature), nothing as being-there (and here

begins the new Jena aspect of this concept) and, with the emergence of the singular nothing that is the human being, there is an emptying out even of this nothing(ness) that there is as nature. Nature is literally nothing as/but what there is and with the origin of mankind, nothing is transformed; there is even less than the natural nothing (in human beings). For, as Hegel notes later, “if the miracle be the suspension of natural laws, Spirit itself is the real miracle in the operations of nature.”<sup>100</sup> What is this suspension? Hegel describes nature’s operations by calling them “the dissecting/leaking [*Auslaufen*] of nature into individualities” within which manifests nature’s “privation [*Entbehnung*] of the concept.”<sup>101</sup> Nature – as seen from the perspective of spirit and thus of the concept – is deprived of the concept (of itself) and this is why, without its unifying power, nature leaks, it runs out. It is as if it has holes everywhere. Nature is an inconsistent entity. It lacks a stable and coherent essence, consistency, or substance. So, (natural) substance is without (proper) substance that operates as a determining and coherent feature of all natural phenomena, and is therefore also not able to substantially determine the place of the human being within it. Nature is fully not-whole, it is full of (not-w)-holes – so much for the dialectic of nature and totality. Hegel explicitly makes this point, when he remarks that

[t]his is the geometry of nature ..., a silent, stunned [*sprachlose*] activity [*Regsamkeit*] that timelessly exhibits its dimensions in an indifferent manner. Therein is no external determination or formation, rather only the silent life-principle of nature that exposes itself inactively [*tatlos*] and of whose formation [*Gebilde*] one can only say that it is there.<sup>102</sup>

Nature is indifferent inactive being-there, that is to say, it is not actively forming the conditions of its own being-there. Being-there, indifferent being-there, – without any further necessity. This is nature. This is also why everything in nature appears to have for nature the equal validity [*gleiche Gültigkeit*] and therefore it is structurally indifferent [*gleichgültig*] – it is indifferent to (new) differences, or all differences amount to the same for it. Its indifferent sameness, only qualified as



being there that fills the space (the “there”) which is for this reason nature’s most fundamental dimension for Hegel. Nature is an indifferent being with (spatial) dimensions (from which then can be derived time),<sup>103</sup> on the basis of which then natural things will develop. But, whatever Hegel’s philosophy of nature will depict (from the emerging chemical processes to the origin of organisms and animal life that then precipitate the emergence of spirit), this entire depiction is clearly articulated from the denaturalizing position of spirit, taking up the findings of the science(s) of nature that are then presented from the philosophical perspective on these very sciences. This generates a spirited account of nature that is formulated because thereby spirit can account for its own emergence and thus comprehend (its own) nature.

Here the pointed question that John Burbidge raised can be given a first preliminary answer. The question is “[h]ow much” in what Hegel is saying about nature “is driven by logical concerns, and how much responds to empirical fact?”<sup>104</sup> We can answer that after the emergence of spirit, the empirical facts of nature change their nature. This is due to the denaturalizing force of spirit onto nature. And from this moment on, spirit seeks – by recourse to the natural sciences and the philosophy of nature – to account for nature in such a systematic way that the contingency of its own emergence can be thought. Spirit derails nature and seeks to grasp the precise conditions for and the overall status of this derailment, which precisely due to the act of examining it is repeatedly deepened. The empirical is thus conceived within a logical frame, which emerged and developed as the sphere of spirit that seeks to account for the very emergence of this framework and for this reason looks at the empirical. Logic demands the account for the empirical fact of the peculiar existence of logical concerns. This does, therefore and obviously, not mean that spirit is simply fantasizing when it looks at nature. It examines the material conditions of its own emergence in a logical way, whereby the a priori becomes the a posteriori and vice versa. Here it becomes clearer why “the philosophy of nature is a crucial and immanent part of the Hegelian system,” even

though “it is ... by far the most discredited part of Hegel’s philosophy, the permanent butt of jokes.”<sup>105</sup>

## The Other-Being of the Idea

A few years later,<sup>106</sup> in 1808, Hegel teaches a high school class, and he teaches his philosophical encyclopedia. A propaedeutic setting in which things should be as simple as possible and as succinct as necessary. In §10 of this encyclopedia, Hegel claims that “the logical is the eternally simple essence in itself; nature is this essence as externalized [*entäußert*]. Spirit is the return of the essence into itself from its externalization.”<sup>107</sup> The three spheres of the logical, nature, and spirit make up “the whole of science” and the sciences of nature and spirit are therein the “*applied sciences*”;<sup>108</sup> both apply the logical. In the first part, the logic, Hegel depicts how the logical culminates in a self-determining and -conceiving form that is articulated in the concept of the idea. At the very beginning of the section dedicated to the “science of nature” Hegel states that “nature is the absolute idea in the shape [*Gestalt*] of Other-being [*Andersseins*] as such.”<sup>109</sup> Nature is the absolute idea as Other-being, it is the being of the idea’s other. In “the ontological logic,”<sup>110</sup> so the part that precedes the science of nature, Hegel noted – and in line with his later *Science of Logic* – that we must make the “beginning of science” with “the whole immediate concept of *Being*,” which ultimately “is equivalent to *Nothing*” and in turn creates a “thought of emptiness” (which, as indicated before, is the thought of thought thinking itself)<sup>111</sup> that nevertheless *is* and therefore brings us back to being. Thereby we end up with “the vanishing of each in its opposite,” which ultimately constitutes “pure *Becoming*.”<sup>112</sup> The ontological logic starts with being, and after it has run its course, we get an Other-being, too. We thus encounter the othering of idea, the idea being in its othering. The move from logic to science of nature is thus one from being of the idea to the shape of an-Other-being. It others.

This means that nature confronts us with another (kind of) being. Yet, it is crucial that this Other-being is a shape of the absolute idea. The



absolute idea identifies itself with, locates itself in and gives itself to an Other, even though this other may also be an other to itself. To understand these formulas, it is instructive to see how Hegel elaborates in 1808, so one year after the publication of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, what he calls an idea. He designates it to be “the adequate Concept in which Determinate Being [*Dasein*] corresponds [*entspricht*] to the Concept as such.”<sup>113</sup> So, an idea is more than just a concept. It is what determines the relationship between a concept and the *Dasein* of which the concept is the concept and vice versa. I, for example, have an adequate concept if the reality of a thing of which I have a concept corresponds to that very concept in such a way that they are ide(a)ntical.<sup>114</sup> For the logical part of Hegel’s course, this can easily be applied: we must here conceive of a concept whose determinate being – i.e. the way it is determined in and through a series of other concepts – corresponds to the concept it is, i.e. has a concept of itself. This purely self-referential and thus absolute structure Hegel calls “the Concept existing as Concept”:<sup>115</sup> it is a concept that precisely has a reality because it has a concept of itself, a concept that can conceptually articulate and determine what it is, because it knows what it is and knows that it knows because it can conceptualize it. In this sense Hegel can describe this structure as a “knowing” or as “absolute idea.”<sup>116</sup> We here thus encounter a knowing that knows what knowing is, and what it is not, and that thereby is a knowing that knows knowing, that knows that it knows. It is knowing knowing knowing. But how does this structure enable us to read the claim that nature is the absolute idea in the shape of its Other-being? How to other a knowing of that kind? We have a concept that corresponds to its (conceptual) reality – this is the logical – and now this is again related to an Other-being, which is why Hegel describes this move in terms of externalization. How to understand this?

The intricacy of Hegel’s claim – and what made it sound so scandalously narcissistic to many – lies in the fact that it can sound as if the absolute idea would create nature, as something that corresponds to it; and this underscores what was perceived as the ultimate flaw of

his absolute idealism. Hegel's claim is particularly intricate because nature, as we have seen before, was supposed to manifest and materialize a far-reaching absence of self-grasp, and even of coherent (formal) structure (and substance). Yet, it nevertheless is (supposed to be) the absolute idea in the shape of its Other-being. How to square these two claims? Nature does not appear in nature and thus to itself, whereas the absolute idea in its formal composition is what Hegel will later in his life call an "*absolute form* which ... contains the *pure idea of truth itself*." <sup>117</sup> So, what is here brought together could hardly seem any more incompatible on all levels. But this very incompatibility is Hegel's point. If the absolute idea names the adequate relation between concept and reality (of the concept), we are here dealing with an adequate relation in the shape of an Other-being. Nature as the absolute idea in the Other-being is thus the articulation, as Slavoj Žižek has argued, of an infinite judgment, similar to "Spirit is a bone." <sup>118</sup> It articulates "an absolute contradiction," <sup>119</sup> which then is not overcome or undone but will precisely be what spirit is. Therefore, the philosophy of spirit appears as the third part of the system. This means that after thinking gained its most elaborate form, it finds itself (embodied) in (non-thinking) nature. Man, as Hegel will famously claim in his later life, is "an amphibious animal, because he now has to live in two worlds which contradict one another." <sup>120</sup> The logical and the natural world.

Nature is thus the absolute idea in its Other-being because neither its concept nor reality correspond adequately. The concept (of nature) is missing (in nature) from the beginning. Nature is a stranger to itself; it does not know what and that it does not know and therefore is indifferent to it(self). It is therefore external to itself, as if it were outside of itself. It has no idea of itself and thereby is the external shape of the idea. We therefore move from the adequate relation between the concept and its reality to the adequate relation between the absence of the concept and its reality. Nature is the absence of the concept and this absence manifests in an appropriately material form; it is an adequate relationship because that which does not conceptually grasp itself corresponds to a material reality, wherein inconsistency and

incoherence reigns. Nature does not know what it is and this lack of knowledge fully corresponds to natural reality, wherein nothing knows what it is. It is not the realm of freedom, but of ungrasped necessity. We are still dealing with a necessity without necessity, a necessity that is not all the way through necessary and thus allows for contingencies, a necessity that is also blind for itself and thereby in parts set free from the very lawfulness of necessity. This is why there is inconsistency, because there is both necessity and contingency in nature.<sup>121</sup> We can thus either understand nature as the adequate relation of that which has neither a proper relation to itself nor to its reality or as the sphere of non-correspondence (of the concept and of reality), as literal *Entsprechung*, as un-speaking, undoing of concept and (its) reality. We thus get two shapes of correspondence (of the idea), which do not correspond to one another. One is the absolute idea, the other is this idea in its Other-being. What we immediately state about nature is that it *is*. It *is* now the other-side of the idea and, thereby, if we seek to think through it, we begin with (other-)being in nature. Again, here anything we say about pure (other-)being will lead us to nothing, which will lead us back to being. This is why we are again stumbling into the concept of becoming or what Hegel calls the “Becoming of Nature [*Werden der Natur*].” This becoming, he declares without too much timidity “is the Becoming of Spirit [*Werden zum Geist*],”<sup>122</sup> and he adds that “nature is to be regarded as a system of grades [*Stufen*], of which one arises necessarily from the other but not in such a way that one is generated by the other naturally, but rather in the inner Idea lying at the base of Nature.”<sup>123</sup>

This is to say that the moment we made the move from the logical (and its peak in the absolute idea) to nature (as the shape of Other-being of this very idea), we conceive of nature from a specific perspective. This is the position of spirit. In this sense, the becoming of (the concept of) nature is the becoming of spirit. We thus look at nature in such a way that we seek to understand how it enables us to formulate a concept of nature, i.e. allows for spirit to emerge. This, obviously, does not exclude at all that “there can even be violations against the determinations of

thought,” because in nature the concepts “are not held together by the unity of one concatenation of thought.”<sup>124</sup> Rather, in it anything can possibly happen. This ought not to irritate the scientific spirit. “If,” for example, “nature is perverse enough to create some people who blanch from shame and blush from fear, science must not let such inconsistencies of nature deter it from recognizing the opposite of these irregularities as law.”<sup>125</sup> Looking at nature scientifically, by conceiving of it as the idea in the shape of its Other-being means, for Hegel, to look at it and seek to determine how it provides the material conditions for the becoming of spirit. In this perspective, nature is regarded as a system of grades and “the philosophy of nature ... rather involves the passive attitude of an observer.”<sup>126</sup> We are regarding in what precise way “the movement of the Idea of Nature is to withdraw into itself [*in sich zu gehen*] from its immediacy, to sublimate itself and become Spirit.”<sup>127</sup> Similarly, Hegel claimed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – that was intended to be the introduction to the system, which thus was introduced from the very perspective of spirit – that this “science of the *experience of consciousness*” necessitated no addition by the scientist, as it were, “the only thing that remains to us is purely to look on [*reines Zusehen*].”<sup>128</sup> Both necessitate merely onlooking, and their marches are directed at a point within themselves, where a shift of perspective becomes possible. We are just looking back – with the gaze of an owl – and seeking to understand how the (material) conditions of possibility emerged that made this shift possible and that we can only account for by shifting the perspective. To put it paradoxically: we look purely at nature in an almost creatively paranoid manner, so that we see in it what we otherwise would not be able to identify without the scientific gaze of spirit, namely how it generated that which at the same time must and cannot simply be derived from it.

From this perspective, we can identify within nature a system of different grades [*Stufen*], stages [*Stufen*], steps [*Stufen*]. Steps on the path to spirit, stages of the development of spirit, grades of its material presupposition. These grades–stages–steps form a system based on which one can identify necessary elements as well as utter

contingencies.<sup>129</sup> Nature is thus not-all chaos (for spirit). But it nevertheless remains inherently contingent. It is, as we know after the emergence of spirit, so contingent that some bits of it even become necessary. But, therefore, it is also not-all order either. It is thus important to remember nature's inconsistency, even though it forms a system of stages (for spirit). Nature confronts us with the simultaneous and incoherent existence of connections that are conceptually necessary and others that violate that very necessity. Nature is thus a non-coherent concept, "nature is not a homogenous 'hard' reality."<sup>130</sup> It is rather inherently heterogenous, an (infinitely finite) Other-being that is other in infinitely many ways.<sup>131</sup> "*Stufen*" is what spirit sees when it looks at nature and seeks to make some sense of it, grade, stages, steps of sense. Yet, this does not mean that spirit is merely hallucinating a system onto where there is none. Rather the philosophy of nature is that which is supposed to allow taking seriously the results of the investigations of the sciences of nature that then are staged and organized in such a way that it becomes possible to unfold a concept of nature. What can thus be apprehended in nature in these terms are already idealities. The identification of these idealities is the work of the philosophy of nature. It constructs a system from what Hegel a year before, in 1807, described as "the beginnings [*Anfänge*] of laws, traces [*Spuren*] of necessity, allusions of order and sequence," what he also called "spiritless freedom."<sup>132</sup> Nature incoheres, presents incoherent material, but also traces of a system to be identified in onlooking at its complex, yet often inconsistent organizations. Nature is not about laws, but about beginnings of laws, not about necessity but about traces of the latter and not about order, but about allusions to it. It is as if it begins but never finishes, alludes but never says it. Philosophy here draws on the sciences of beginnings, traces, and allusions.

Philosophy therefore works under the condition of the natural sciences for Hegel. They consider nature as "(1) the ideal existence [*Dasein*] ... as space and time generally, (2) as Inorganic Nature, (3) as Organic Nature," and are thereby distinguished into "(1) Mathematics, (2) Physics of the Inorganic, (3) Science of Organic Nature,"<sup>133</sup> or

biology.<sup>134</sup> The philosophy of nature moves through each of them as each addresses a specific step and stage and a specific way of stepping and staging. Philosophy thus takes a step-by-step approach – which here means one should, for example, not assume a biologist is also a mathematician and vice versa or that the latter even has any interest in elaborating an entire concept of nature. This approach begins with “the existent thought of universal indifferent diversity in general,” i.e. the concept space, and “the existent thought of ... pure Becoming,”<sup>135</sup> i.e. the concept of time. These combine into space-time that, because of the “asunderness [*Außereinander*] of space and the being-within-self of time posited absolutely in one, yield the concept of Matter in general.”<sup>136</sup> Extension and condensation produce matter, which is treated in mechanical physics, i.e. in the physics of the inorganic. The physics of organic nature constitutes the last step and stage in and of (the philosophy of) nature’s long march wherein we will discover the turning point from which the science of spirit begins. This means that the philosophy of nature gives us an account of the material conditions from which emerges a process of nature’s own denaturalization.

Spirit is the natural entity that has a concept of itself as natural entity – and thus of nature – and is thereby more than just a natural entity.<sup>137</sup> But, as we have argued above, when it takes this concept just as a natural given, as something it is always equipped with (and can trust in), when this concept becomes part of its (second) nature, it can very well lose the concept of itself having (created) a concept of nature and therefore regress. Thereby, spirit embodies the peculiar non-relation that strikes at the heart of the idea (between the two types of correspondence or relation between concept or absence of concept and its reality). We thus move from logic through nature to spirit (with a self-effacing introductory philosophy of spirit preceding it).<sup>138</sup> Nature is the idea in the shape of an Other-being, but the idea is not nature in the shape of an Other-being – there is no reciprocity here. There is thus a strict order how to perform every move into the next part of the system. This obviously complicates the relation between logic, nature, and the subject. It necessitates us to examine again more closely the



way in which we actually *make the move* from the logical to the natural. This is not only the case because “the transition from logic to the philosophy of nature is ... without a doubt one of the most difficult and frustrating transitions in Hegel’s system for both critics and proponents of his thought,”<sup>139</sup> but also because Hegel will use a unique concept to conceive of it.

## **From Natural Substance to Conceptual Subject ...**

In 1812, Hegel publishes the *Science of Logic*, which seeks to expose “*God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit.*”<sup>140</sup> After the first edition, he is decided to again revise this exposition. But he will never get to the end of it before his very own end. And only at the *Logic*’s end, we make the move to nature. In the *Logic*, we get a very detailed version of what he previously called ontological logic. It is now distinguished into an objective and subjective logic, and therein into the doctrine of being, the doctrine of essence (belonging to the objective logic) and the doctrine of the concept (which belongs to the subjective logic). In the *Logic* we think the formation of thought before there is anything to be thought. Hegel describes the structure of this exposition as “the course of the fact itself [*den Gang der Sache selbst*].”<sup>141</sup> Thought is creative, gradually creating thought while thinking (thought). And at some point – yet to be determined – it cannot but think of nature.

As all beginnings are simple and unavoidably opaque, especially when there is (not even) nothing given, Hegel calls the logic “the realm of shadows, the world of simple essentialities freed from all sensuous concretion,”<sup>142</sup> wherein we think the determinations of the absolute (as that which is absolved of all determinations other than its own). These determinations are “increasingly condensed [*verdichten sich immer mehr*].”<sup>143</sup> in the thought-process. Thinking thought is not poetizing (*dichten*), but condensing (*verdichten*). Thinking in this peculiar cave (of thinking), we start to qualify thinking.<sup>144</sup> At the beginning of the *Logic* “there is only present the resolve, which can also

be viewed as arbitrary, of considering *thinking as such*"<sup>145</sup> – we do not start with any presupposition (about what it is to think). Hegel begins by considering only the being, the pure being of this very resolve, which ultimately amounts to nothing, as it did not even tell us how to begin, but only *that* we begin. This leads us into becoming, and so things start to pass.

With the beginning of the *Science of Logic* we have moved into the very heart of Hegel's overall project. The material previously referred to in this chapter and thus the previous discussions of the concept of nature was not published in Hegel's day and not by his own hand. But in the *Logic* we will get the first proper book-form account of how to get from the (logical) idea to nature. This pass is part of the doctrine of the concept, i.e. of the subjective logic and thus of the last huge part of the book. Hegel in general describes the concept as "the truth" of what he names "the relation of substantiality."<sup>146</sup> To elucidate this claim, he turns to Spinoza's *Ethics* in which, one should recall, God is presented as nature (recall the last of the eight dialectics of nature). He turns to Spinoza to ultimately make a move from (nature as) substance to (freedom as) subject.<sup>147</sup> This move can in a preliminary sense be understood as a move from God as substance to God as subject. With it we also learn that the truth of the concept of necessity ultimately lies in the concept of freedom. Hegel's traversal of Spinoza does not externally point out a weakness in the latter's system. Rather, he internally accentuates and inflates its strengths, so that they are forced to cross the system's very own limits and that Spinoza is metaphorically forced to claim what his system does not allow for, but at the same time what he cannot but admit. How is this possible? By showing that in the way in which Spinoza conceives of nature as substance, he is necessitated – and necessity is what substantially qualifies his concept of substance – to admit that the defining feature of substance, namely necessity, is itself posited. It is not always already a substantially given. To abbreviate Hegel's argument massively, we can claim that Hegel will show how the necessity that Spinoza sees as what defining feature of substance can ultimately not but be posited; but, because it is the



necessary feature of substance, it must be posited by substance (as *subject* of this very act of positing).

This is what Hegel calls “the unveiling [*Enthüllung*] of substance, and this is the *genesis of the concept*”:<sup>148</sup> now it is exposed, unveiled, revealed, uncovered, but also debunked, divulged, exposed as what it is. The unveiling of substance, substance laid bare, bare substance is what makes the concept. It lost its shroud, cover, veil, and we realize that behind the veil is only what we – the subject(s) – put there. We here encounter a substance bare, denuded, barred, and broken by the concept. The barred substance implies thus – because the logic of the concept is part of the subjective logic – a subjective stance. The substance’s inner necessity only appears to be necessary because it was posited as being necessity, whereby necessity becomes the conceptual way in which an act of freedom appears. Hegel here in grandiose terms claims that “in the concept, the kingdom of freedom is disclosed [*eröffnet*]”:<sup>149</sup> unveiling the substance as something whose inner feature cannot be derived from the substance itself but relies on a subjective positing act disclosing the kingdom of freedom that is the concept. As Hegel puts it: “*substance has been let go freely into the concept.*” The concept gains through “its simple self-reference an absolute determinateness.” The concept is absolutely determined, because when we, for example, say “freedom” is “freedom,” we determine “freedom” absolutely by means only of itself. And this is what makes the concept into “the universal.” But “this self-reference of determinateness ... is just as much a negation of determinateness,” this is to say “freedom is freedom” negates all other determination to freedom than that of freedom. Thereby, it also holds that “the concept is the singular.”<sup>150</sup> Concepts are singularized universals.<sup>151</sup> The kingdom of freedom is thus populated by concrete universals, “the absolute universality which is just as immediately absolute singularization” therefore also “constitutes the nature of the ‘I’ and of the *concept*.” This means that the “I is I,” the pure I, is also structured like a concept (this is why the doctrine of the concept and the subjective logic are tied together). This means that the subject is something absolutely singular

and absolutely universal and, because subjects use concepts, the subject is itself inherently populated by singularized universals. They are the populations, as it were, in which we think. [152](#)

As Hegel supposedly claimed in 1817: “Because I do not know that I think, does not mean that I am not thinking. Even sleeping and in an unconscious [*bewußtlosem*] state, man is always thinking [*denkend*].” [153](#) This has repercussions for how to read the move from substance to subject. Since it may seem that now the subject’s substance is stable and can be identified with and in the conceptual realm, and therefore with the capacity to think. But, because the concept is absolutely universal, it thinks in me, even when I am not aware of it. This means that it can happen that I not only do not know what I am doing (thinking), but even more so that I might not even know what I am thinking. The point is here that the subject’s substance is so universal that it can even escape the subject. But conceptual thinking is also absolutely singular. It mobilizes singular ways of singularizing this universality of thought. They are singular because thinking manifests in singular concatenations of concepts that are posited by me, even though I might not be aware of positing them. Thinking in this sense is always an expression of my freedom. What we thus think in the doctrine of the concept entails a concept of thinking, which is bound together with a peculiar form of automatism that drives a freedom that is (af-)forming [154](#) a singularly (because uniquely posited), collective (because made of multiple concept), universal (because unified), absolute form. An absolute form that forms itself by uniquely shaping a commune of singularities.

This abbreviated and condensed move through aspects of the doctrine of the concept was only supposed to allow us to understand Hegel’s claim that “the concept is as such not yet complete ... it must rather be raised to the idea.” [155](#) Because the idea is still the unity of reality and the concept, and therefore, this is crucial, “*something has truth only insofar as it is idea*.” [156](#) It is against this background that he claims that “the logic [*das Logische*] ... exhibits the rise of the *idea* up to the level from which it becomes the creator of nature and passes over into the

form of a *concrete immediacy*, whose concept, however, again shatters this shape also in order to realize itself as *concrete spirit*.”<sup>157</sup> We have finally moved to the point where the idea is addressed as creator of nature – the worst kind of idealism it may seem. It passes over into something concretely immediate. What is the nature of this passing over of the idea into the concrete immediacy of nature? And how to square this with Hegel’s claim that the idea is also the creator of nature? Is the passing over also a passing away? Like a mother dying in childbirth. But if the idea is the coming together of concept and its reality, the move into the reality of nature seems to be unavoidable once we generate the concept of the logical itself (wherein thinking thinkingly examines itself).

Hegel indicates that the subjectivity of pure thought in the logic generates an objectivity that is adequate to itself:<sup>158</sup> the concept reaches its truth when pure thought creatively determines its own form in the process of thinking itself. Thought thereby thinkingly determines how its singularly universal constitution is thought. This is like a true practice of thinking truth production through thinking. It is truth production because what we think is fundamentally true (with regard) to how we think, and the two have become inseparable. This is what Hegel also calls the “absolute truth”; “the infinite idea in which cognizing and doing are equalized,”<sup>159</sup> which is why he can speak of an “identity of the theoretical and practical idea.”<sup>160</sup> We learn in the *Logic* that thinking is a practice that is creative of ideas, ideas of what thinking is, and thereby what we do in the *Logic* is to think thinking by constantly thinking new ideas of what thinking new ideas of thinking is. This absolute idea, “the rational concept ... is the sole subject matter and content of philosophy.”<sup>161</sup>

Philosophy is necessarily the philosophy of the idea. Hegel states that “nature and spirit are in general different modes of exhibiting *its* [the absolute idea’s] *existence*, art and religion its different modes of apprehending itself and giving itself appropriate existence.”<sup>162</sup> Nature and spirit exhibit the absolute idea, i.e. they exhibit the being-there of

the thought thinking the creation of new ideas of thinking. In what is exhibited in nature and in spirit, thought thinks the creation of new ideas of thinking. Nature and spirit are thus different modes of the absolute idea. In the latter, it thinks itself and thus has its reality in the shapes of art, religion, and philosophy, and therein it thinks the creation of new and historically situated ideas of thinking. But this must also mean that thought also thinkingly creates new ideas of what it is also when it thinks that which does not think but from which it – contingently/necessarily – emerged, namely nature. The philosophy of nature is therefore “*thinking* consideration of Nature.”<sup>163</sup> In what way can Hegel claim that “the absolute idea is immediately nature”?<sup>164</sup> As Catherine Malabou elucidated: “without this incorporation, logical life remains an abstraction”;<sup>165</sup> it would be a concept without reality. In 1817, Hegel claims that “spirited being is the absolute idea itself. The concept as the idea intuiting itself is nature.”<sup>166</sup> To abbreviate Hegel’s own abbreviations even more: the absolute idea is embodied in a natural being that, therefore, when it comes to the concept of itself as thinking being, immediately understands that thinking beings have their embodied reality in nature. Thinking beings in thinking new ideas of thinking cannot but come up with the idea (of thinking) that thinking manifests in nature. This obviously does neither mean that (everything in) nature thinks nor that thinking is simply natural. But if we seek to intuit what thinking *looks* like, we merely see nature, something natural (and thus not thinking).

If “the absolute idea is immediately nature,” it is in nature more (or less) than nature. It is “the pulse that rises [*der Puls, der sich erhebt*].”<sup>167</sup> Not sublation [*Aufhebung*] of nature, but a rising or elevation [*Erhebung*] in pulse. The absolute idea thus does not show itself in nature as natural heartbeat, but an elevated pulse-rate that will drive spirit out of nature. It should be clear that all this does not imply that thought would “precede nature in time and bring nature into being through a creative act.”<sup>168</sup> It is rather that thought thinking thought cannot not discover that which precedes thought and from which it emerged. It is important to here emphasize that Hegel does not argue

for a neat passing over into nature and a safe and unproblematic passage out of it. When thinking thinking thinking starts to intuit itself as and identify itself in nature, we are confronted with the unsettling aspects of “the impotence [*Ohnmacht*] of nature,”<sup>169</sup> the without (*ohne*) power (*Macht*) of nature. Hegel means by this “that it [nature] cannot abide by and exhibit the rigor of the concept and loses itself in a blind manifoldness void of concept.” Looking at nature, to pun the famous Kantian dictum, we encounter intuitions without concepts, which therefore are blind. Hegel suggests that this is why “we can *wonder* at nature, at the manifoldness of its genera and species, in the infinite diversity of its shapes, for wonder is *without concept*”<sup>170</sup> – this is again the point that Hegel had made already on his trip to the Alps. Nature’s arbitrary productions and multiplicities, which are without concept and power, suggest a significance that at the same time cannot easily be appropriated by or converted into conceptual investigation.

The concept of nature is to a certain extent without concept. Nature is impotent and incomplete<sup>171</sup> – there are holes, gaps, breaks, inconsistencies in it. And, therefore, it “sets limits to philosophy,” because it makes us aware that “it is quite improper to expect the Notion to comprehend – or as it is said, construe or deduce – these contingent products of Nature.”<sup>172</sup> Nature’s productions are so void of concept that concepts have no power about certain parts of nature. This is less because of nature’s materiality, but due to its impotence and incompleteness. What can appear as nature’s power over the concept arises from its very impotence. We here clearly see a certain opacity that remains in spirit’s own understanding of itself, in thought’s own thinking of itself when it starts to conceive of itself also as natural, i.e. as Other-being. This is not simply a result of its material embodiment, but because this embodiment might not be neatly conceivable within any (or appropriable by an) overarching consistent conceptual framework. This means that thinking does not properly think thinking without thinking incompleteness and impotence, and hence without that within which there is nothing to think. But this puts even more

pressure on how to conceive of the passing over of the idea into nature, which is also supposed to be a creation.

Yet, encountering limitations in the grasp of the concept, because of the nature's constitution does not finitize thought. It rather "remains perfectly transparent to itself."<sup>173</sup> We even have a concept of that which is in parts void of the concept, i.e. nature. But how then does this passage from thought to nature work? Hegel remarks that "the Logic [*das Logische*] thus exhibits the self-movement of the absolute idea only as the original *word*, a word which is an *utterance* [*Äußerung*], but one that in being externally uttered has immediately vanished again."<sup>174</sup> After God thought about the creation of nature and finite spirit, she spoke. She made her thoughts explicit and external. But God's word after it had been uttered immediately vanished and instead of God's word, we just get an incomplete, impotent nature. This can obviously mean that nature is itself the proof that God – as almighty creator whose creation exhibits her very own consistency and perfection everywhere – does not exist, and that she strangely admitted it by giving us material proof of her own inexistence. This proof we can find in the inconsistencies of her creation. Nature is not a book but an utterance with which God tells us that she does not exist. Because what we have to work with is impotent, inconsistent, and powerless. Like a word without a concept, mere *spiel*, drivel, or rambling. Nature, as form of appearance of what is left of the utterance of God's word after its vanishing – Hegel calls this "the abiding [*Bleiben*] of vanishing,"<sup>175</sup> – is a (actually: God's) proof that God is dead. If the *Logic* depicts God's thought and ends with her speculative word,<sup>176</sup> the word wherein God reveals itself not to the world, but as nature (and then also as finite spirit) is one that only reveals that there is nothing to reveal, except *that* there is nothing to reveal. Nature is a word, an ex-pression, externalization [*Äußerung*], void of concept.

### ... to Releasing Nature

Close to the end of the *Logic*, Hegel speaks of what he calls the "turning-point of the movement of the concept."<sup>177</sup> It originates in the absolute



idea and consists in “the demand for an infinite retrogression in proof and deduction; just as from the newly obtained beginning a result likewise emerges as the method runs its course, so that the method would roll on forwards to infinity as well.”<sup>178</sup> At the peak of the unfolding of the *Logic*, we (re-)turn to the beginning and repeat the movement, since we now have reached a more appropriate understanding of what (the being of the resolve at) the beginning and with it the entire project that has run its course was all about: namely to create and discover a new idea of what it is to create and discover a new idea of thought while thinking. So, we move back and repeat the move forward; the dynamic of the movement that we then here encounter can be represented graphically with the infinity symbol:  $\infty$ . We determine things increasingly by returning and repeating the movement of the concept, which thereby has become infinite and, in this respect, can be taken as one that has the immanent structure of truth or absolute form.<sup>179</sup> And we will repeat this movement: not only after we have completed the first repetition, but in some sense infinitely.

In this cycle of repetition, there is a movement of “exteriorization,” but it also holds that “greater the expansion, just as dense is the intensity”<sup>180</sup> – as if in an almost Nietzschean model of the eternal return of the same that contains both a centripetal and centrifugal movement.<sup>181</sup> This is what Hegel calls a “reflection into itself.”<sup>182</sup> We are thus also bending the movement of thought, thinking the creation of new ideas of thinking back to the resolve with which it began, and we are now even able to formulate the concept of the science of logic – because, bending backwards and repeating forwards, we totalize and think the entirety of the course we have passed. It is here that Hegel makes the final move, thought’s real rite of passage: by creating the concept of the science of logic in its entirety, we cannot but notice that we are still moving solely within the logical sphere. Or, in Hegel’s words, we are “shut up within subjectivity” and, therefore, there is “the drive to sublate it, and pure truth becomes the final result and also the *beginning of another sphere and science*.”<sup>183</sup> Thinking thinking thinking

expands and contracts, condenses and displaces itself. And then there is the drive to sublimate thinking thinking thinking, as if a drive to sublimate sublation itself. But, this seems impossible; it would bring back what it seeks to overcome. Thought thus cannot deduce material reality from itself. Which is why the totality of the movement of *Logic* – that we just as if as a model thinkingly placed in front of ourselves – is here supplemented. It is supplemented with another repetition, namely with the repetition of the “resolve”<sup>184</sup> that made its beginning. But here, at the end of the *Logic*, it is not the resolve to consider thinking as such. But a resolve in another form, the resolve in the shape of an Other-being. Here it is the resolve to consider non-thinking as such.

The resolve is in German *Entschluss* – a speculative word, God’s? – literally a non-syllogistic opening, an un-ending<sup>185</sup> of the idea. At the end, we resolve and un-end again – a repetition of the immediate as result. But Hegel at the end of the *Logic* uses the resolve in relation to another highly significant *Ent*-word (after inter alia *Entsprechung* and *Entschluss*), one that articulates the drive of the idea and manifests the precise mode in which the creative passing over of the idea must be thought. It indicates what the resolve resolves. It is an operation that has vexed generations of Hegel’s readers and which he himself only “indicates”<sup>186</sup> or alludes to: the absolute idea at the end “freely discharges itself, absolutely certain of itself and eternally at rest.”<sup>187</sup> The resolve thus decides the free release or discharge of the idea. There is an *Entlassen*, an *Entschluss*, *sich zu Entlassen*, a resolve to release itself.<sup>188</sup> It seems to move but it is also forever at rest, it leaves itself but it stays put. To approach this, it is instructive to note that a similar gesture occurs at the end of the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel writes that



[f]or self-knowing spirit, just for the reason that it grasps its own concept, is an immediate equality with itself, which in its differences is the *certainty of the immediate*, or is *sensuous consciousness* – the beginning from which we started. This release of itself from the form of its own self is the highest freedom and the highest assurance of its knowing of itself.<sup>189</sup>

If the *Phenomenology's* aim is to dismantle and disqualify all problematic presuppositions, so that we are ultimately aware of all the possible ways in which not to begin with philosophy (as science of thinking), it leads us to a point where we know what it is (not) to know and where we also therefore know that we know. Therein we have established an immediate unity of (the) being and thinking (of knowledge) and this immediacy is taking us back to the beginning – since it is this very book that also began with a discussion of the immediacy at play in sense-certainty. So, at the end, we begin again. We run again through the course of the thing and release ourselves from clinging to ourself, we hand our-self over to the movement of thought happening in us (again). This also splits the beginning in two. It splits it into two, because we do not simply return but we produced a novel immediacy, through working through the first one. And, at the end of the *Phenomenology*, we do not simply return to its beginning, we also progress to the *Logic*. We thus return constantly to better understand what just happened, but we also progress and begin another project. The latter we begin, as we know, with a resolve. This implies that the return to the beginning, which is at the same time a progressing to a new beginning, is not simply another logical transition. The returning movement implies an element of release because it accepts the contingency of the immediate natural embodiment of knowing as what it is and in this sense “*nature*, is its living, immediate coming-to-be.”<sup>190</sup> This immediate coming-to-be, we argued above, cannot be logically deduced, and spirit now knows this, because it is certain of what knowing is. The progressing movement implies an element of release, because therein manifests that knowledge knows that knowledge will never be enough to make a beginning in and with the logical. Which is

why the actual *Science of Logic* begins with a “setting aside,”<sup>191</sup> a *Beiseitsetzung*, a taking a step aside, a move to the side. Why now should a version of all this also occur at the end of the *Logic*?

It is crucial that Hegel states in the latter that “there is no transition”<sup>192</sup> from the *Logic* to nature. Instead, there is the free release. Material nature is not deduced from the concept, but the concept confronts material nature, which is there, in part void of concept. The term release, *Entlassen*, implies a letting go, a discharge, a dissolving of a certain function. What is here released when the idea resolves to “determine itself as external idea”?<sup>193</sup> We demonstrated that the drive of the idea emerges from the infinitely condensing and expanding movement that is established in the course of thinking thinking itself and that confronts us with the problem that this movement is still, in Hegel’s own depiction, only subjective and seeks to make itself objective. This – because the movement is one of “sublation” – is what forces us to conceive of a sublation of sublation itself. The deadlock we are encountering here is that this sublation of sublation only works if it does and does not sublimate sublation, otherwise we would still be expanding and condensing. But thereby we keep expanding and condensing. The only way to resolve this is to resolve it. We need to make a step aside, set it aside. We need a supplement. It is good news that we had it all along.

At the peak of the dialectical self-conception of thought, there is a paralogical shift, a move to the side, a side-stepping, parataxis. The release at the end of the *Logic* operates like a peculiar determinate affirmation that affirms nature as shape of the absolute idea; it resolutely affirms that thought materially manifests in the realm of non-thinking. In this sense, it creates nature, namely a different nature: nature as realm of the material embodiment of thought, or in short: the concept of nature. From this perspective, it is now clear why Hegel can claim that “it acquires the standing of having been posited by spirit, and this makes it a product.”<sup>194</sup> Nature is a creation because it is the very concept with which thought thinking thinking creates (the thought) of its own presupposition. It is a gesture of release because, in creating this

concept – and thereby in identifying itself with a material embodiment – it does not alter its own expansive-condensing movement, but it also accepts that nature, void of the concept, obeys its own – not rules, but – impotence and incompleteness and hence cannot be deduced from thought. Put differently: when there cannot be any satisfaction of the drive of the idea (in objectivity), because we cannot deduce objective existence and reality from within the realm of shadows, this inner deadlock, impossibility and – could we not say? – incompleteness internal to the absolute idea is now released. It is materially embodied in nature. This does not mean that nature is simply a construction of thought. It rather means that the internal incompleteness of the absolute idea (its being shut up inside subjectivity) here literally manifests as and corresponds to the incompleteness of nature.

At the end, we encounter the *Entsprechung* – God has spoken but his utterance vanished – of the (purely subjective and therefore surprising) incompleteness specific to the absolute idea – which manifests in the idea-drive – and the incompleteness of nature. We therefore here at the end of the *Logic* encounter two corresponding incompletenesses: the concept of the absolute idea on the one side is driven toward making itself objective but cannot derive objectivity from its own movement (and sublate sublation). This now corresponds to the reality of the impotence and incompleteness of nature, void of the concept. The highest and the lowest, so to speak, here are two sides of the same: the absolute idea is nature. This is what the resolve to release, as articulation of the idea-drive, produces. Two corresponding incompletes, concept and reality. A two-much of incompleteness.

## Unavoidable Naturalization

The systematic place of the actual philosophy of nature is in Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*.<sup>195</sup> Therein it is also preceded by a logic, the small (encyclopedic) logic and there we also find an operation of release making the non-transition from logic to nature. In the final paragraph of this logic, § 244, Hegel states, mirroring, but modifying the passage from the end of the *Logic* that

“the absolute freedom of the idea is that ... in the absolute truth of itself, it *resolves to release* [itself] *freely from itself ... as nature.*”<sup>196</sup> The idea decides to release itself from itself and the form in which this happens is nature. Hegel again defined in §18 of the *Encyclopedia* the philosophy of nature as that part of philosophy that deals with “the idea in its otherness.”<sup>197</sup> He describes the move from the absolute idea to nature again in terms of a return. There is a “return to the beginning,” which is “at the same time a move forward.”<sup>198</sup> At the end of a process of thought thinking thought that discovers itself by inventing itself along the way, thought starts to reflect on the very conditions of its own (self-) creation. Thought at the highest peak of its own self-referential theoretical and practical activity looks back over its shoulder and determines what will have conditioned it all along since its own commencement.<sup>199</sup>

So, when thinking thinks thought, it cannot but also think what “it” is not to think. In the *Encyclopedia*, one can read this as stating that the highest form of thought thinking thought must also think its own absence – as material condition for its own emergence. In this sense, Hegel can state – already in the philosophy of spirit – that “*for us* spirit has *nature* as its *presupposition*, though spirit is the *truth* of nature and is thus *absolutely first* with respect to it” – it is only as “return [*Zurückkommen*] out of nature.”<sup>200</sup> Thought logically precedes nature as that which posits nature as precisely that which historically precedes thought. This is thus the idea in the form of externality and otherness. Nature is the one thing wherein thought seeks to find itself, precisely because it cannot be derived from thought. Thought is logically prior, because only when it generates the concept of nature it looks at nature as that which provides the material conditions for its own emergence, and is the space (and material) for its own embodiment.

In the study of nature spirit finds “in Nature its own essence, i.e. the Notion, finds its counterpart in her. The study of Nature is thus the liberation of Spirit in her, for Spirit is present in her in so far as it is in relation not with an Other, but with itself.”<sup>201</sup> In this sense, spirit looks

at a nature that it posits as its presupposition<sup>202</sup> in an attempt to conceive of it itself. But this also means that it looks at nature to understand itself in relation to nature as different from it. Spirit is in this sense denaturalizing nature because it forms the concept of nature as that basis for its own self-comprehension. It is thus not examining nature, as what Hegel calls “the corpse of the Understanding,”<sup>203</sup> something it can endlessly dissect and test. It means that thought finds “nature” outside of itself and treats it as if it were nothing but an embodiment of its own absence. This is mortifying because it is not only turning nature into a corpse, but it also mortifies the relation between spirit and nature. It does so because it also naturalizes nature, that is to say that it turns nature into an object that is entirely external to spirit. This is the type of naturalization of nature that spirit must avoid, since nature is not simply external to spirit, rather spirit emerged from it. We thus equally have to avoid all naturalization of spirit’s relation to nature and of nature itself, since both tempt us to assume that we might be able to find a natural account of what spirit is. But Hegel reminds us that “spirit does not emerge in a natural manner from nature.”<sup>204</sup> There must thus be something unnatural in nature, nature is thus not one, not consistent, inherently unnatural. Spirit, in seeking to conceive of itself, must conceive of nature, but it must do so in a denaturalizing manner, taking into account that it emerged from nature in an unnatural manner. If it looks at nature as if it were natural, it consequently starts to mortify not only nature, but also itself. These types of naturalizations are not external to our ways of thinking, otherwise we would naturalize naturalizations themselves, but a constant conceptual temptation. In this sense, nature shows itself as a material precondition for thinking. Hegel’s concept of nature thus entails the warning to always denaturalize. Especially nature. With this condensed passage through some crucial determinations of Hegel’s concept of nature, we have reached a point where we are sufficiently equipped to examine the actual contemporary value of his philosophy of nature. We have thus prepared ourselves to (continue to) read Hegel.

## Notes

- [1.](#) Letter “From Johan Georg Hamann, late December, 1759,” in Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*, trans. and ed. Arnulf Zweig (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 63f. Translation modified.
- [2.](#) Gérard Lebrun, *L’Envers de la dialectique. Hegel à la lumière de Nietzsche* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), p. 19.
- [3.](#) Fernando Pessoa, *The Collected Poems of Alberto Caeiro* (Exeter: Shearmans Books, 2007), p. 70.
- [4.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1: Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 90.
- [5.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), p. 53
- [6.](#) Ibid., pp. 55f.
- [7.](#) Ibid., p. 61.
- [8.](#) Ibid., p. 59. Translation modified.
- [9.](#) Ibid.
- [10.](#) A longer characterization of this type of Hegelianism from a slightly different perspective can be found in Rebecca Comay / Frank Ruda, *The Dash – the Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), pp. 14ff.
- [11.](#) I here modify a statement by Jacques Lacan, who spoke of a “psychoanalytic New Deal,” which was directed against the “Ego-analysis”-faction within the psychoanalytic community. Cf. Jacques Lacan, “Response to Jean Hyppolite’s Commentary on Freud’s ‘Verneinung,’” in *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), p. 319. In a sense, the novel geriatric Hegelians are Ego-Hegelians.
- [12.](#) To assume that we can evaluate Hegel’s thought from the standpoint of the present, which then provides us with the adequate

standard to do so, has been ridiculed by Adorno, as mentioned in the introduction. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Three Studies on Hegel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 1.

[13.](#) V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), p. 41. This is a claim that Žižek, Hamza thinking through sketches and I have also made vis-à-vis the reading of Marx in *Reading Marx* (London: Polity, 2018).

[14.](#) Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, p. 41.

[15.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 240.

[16.](#) Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 55.

[17.](#) Ibid. The former is Hegel's depiction of childhood, the latter of old age. I am here consciously leaving out the position of the man, who not only mediates young and old age but also struggles to find his place in the world that he essentially accepts as what it is. I am leaving this position aside here for reasons that should become clear subsequently.

[18.](#) Hegel, *Outlines*, p. 16.

[19.](#) Ibid., p. 241.

[20.](#) Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 14.

[21.](#) It might not be a total coincidence that one can therefore notice a strong tendency toward Aristotelian readings of Hegel within the novel geriatric Hegelian camp. I am here in agreement with Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuhback's pointed argument that contemporary capitalism is structurally like the Aristotelian unmoved mover around which everything turns, but which does not move a single bit. If capitalism is Aristotelian, it would deserve further examination if Aristotelianism is also structurally – even if this is an anachronistic judgment – capitalist (or not or if only in some of its interpretations). Cf. Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, "Thinking Through Sketches"



(typescript). Badiou has harshly pointed out what he perceives as an inner link between Aristotle and corruption when he stated that “Aristotle was the tutor of Alexander the Great, a crook of the first category and on top he was the inventor of academic philosophy.” Cf. Alain Badiou, *Par Alain Badiou* (Paris: PUF, 2021), pp. 65f.

[22.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, Vol. 1, in *Werke*, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 259.

[23.](#) Ibid., p. 222.

[24.](#) Cf. Frederick Engels / Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. xxx

[25.](#) One should also not be too swift to identify these reasons without proper analysis, as it is not always the repressive character of these regimes or their economic mismanagement that generated their downfall, even though they were often economically mismanaged and repressive.

[26.](#) Alain Badiou, “Foreword,” in *Of an Obscure Disaster – On the End of the Truth of the State* (Maastricht: JVE, 2009), p. 6.

[27.](#) Alain Badiou, *Trump* (London / New York: Polity, 2019), p. 32.

[28.](#) This term was coined by Alain Badiou to describe the assumption that “there are only bodies and languages,” which Badiou opposed to that of a materialist dialectic, which adds to this that there are only bodies and language, “except that there are truths.” Cf. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event*, 2 (London / New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 1–9.

[29.](#) I have problematized such an assumption in Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom. A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2018). That we are not always already fully rational at birth and therefore must cultivate and discipline what is already potentially there is the bottom line of the novel geriatric Hegelian interpretation of the Aristotelian conception of *phronesis*. For a helpful overview of problems related to this debate,



cf. *Mind, Reason, and Being-In-The-World: The McDowell–Dreyfus Debate*, ed. Joseph K. Schear (London: Routledge, 2013).

[30.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, “Philosophical Dissertation on the Orbits of the Planets and the Habitations Theses,” in *Miscellaneous Writings of G.W.F. Hegel* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), p. 171.

[31.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 226. Translation modified.

[32.](#) Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, pp. 91, 111, 113, and 116.

[33.](#) Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (London / New York: Polity, 2017), pp. 4 and 8.

[34.](#) Peter Sloterdijk, “The Anthropocene: Process-State at the Edge of Geohistory?,” in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, eds Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), p. 330.

[35.](#) Cf. for this also: Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm* (London: Verso, 2020).

[36.](#) John Sallis, *The Return of Nature. On the Beyond of the Sense* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 10.

[37.](#) Alain Badiou, “On the Epidemic Situation,” at: Verso (versobooks.com).

[38.](#) Sallis, *The Return of Nature*, p. 15.

[39.](#) Ibid.

[40.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy to Plato* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 117.

[41.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. The Lectures of 1827* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 209f.

[42.](#) Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, Vol. 1, p. 260.

[43.](#) Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy*, p. 152.

[44.](#) Ibid., p. 153. Translation modified.

[45.](#) Ibid. Translation modified.

[46.](#) Ibid., p. 152.

[47.](#) Ibid., p. 155. Hegel will remark that, “properly speaking, we ... first begin the history of philosophy” with Thales (ibid., p. 171), “the first natural philosopher” (ibid., p. 173).

[48.](#) Ibid., p. 155. Translation modified.

[49.](#) In the case of Thales, this is easily demonstrable, as the claim that water is the principle does “for us not look philosophical, but physical; yet the material has philosophical meaning.” Ibid., p. 175. This sentence is missing from the translation.

[50.](#) Cf. Alain Badiou, *La Nature. Cours d'agrégation d'Alain Badiou (ENS-Ulm, 2000–2001)*, at: [www.entretiens.asso.fr](http://www.entretiens.asso.fr).

[51.](#) Virgil, *Georgica II*, Verse 490.

[52.](#) Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 14.

[53.](#) Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London / New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 123.

[54.](#) Badiou, *La Nature*.

[55.](#) Ibid.

[56.](#) Ibid.

[57.](#) Ibid.

[58.](#) Ibid.

[59.](#) Ibid.

[60.](#) Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Selected Writings* (New York: Random House, 1940), p. 4.

[61.](#) An instructive reconstruction of the early critiques of Schelling and Feuerbach can be found in Alison Stone, *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel's Philosophy* (New York: SUNY, 2012), pp. 101ff.

[62.](#) A recent account can be found in Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Vol. Two: A Weak Nature Alone* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), pp. 15ff. The situation looks a bit different for the German reception of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*. For a helpful contextualization cf. Stephen Houlgate, "Introduction," in *Hegel and the Philosophy of Nature*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (New York: SUNY, 1998), pp. xi–xxvii.

[63.](#) William Maker, "The Very Idea of the Idea of Nature, or Why Hegel is not an Idealist," in *Hegel and the Philosophy of Nature*, p. 1.

[64.](#) Johnston, *Prolegomena*, p. 22.

[65.](#) Adorno, *Three Studies*, p. 3.

[66.](#) Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism. The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 506. For reasons of space, I will leave aside the entire, even though important discussion between Schelling and Hegel.

[67.](#) Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 3.

[68.](#) Reconstructions of Hegel's early philosophies of nature can be found in H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Development. Night Thoughts (1801–1806)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 74–101, 238–298, 419–466.

[69.](#) Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, "Philosophical Dissertation on the Orbits of the Planets and the Habilitation Theses," in *Miscellaneous Writings* of

G.W.F. Hegel, ed. John Stewart (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), pp. 63–206.

[70.](#) For an instructive clarification of this, cf. Thomas Sören Hoffmann, *Hegel: Eine Propädeutik* (Wiesbaden: Marix 2012), pp. 146ff.

[71.](#) Hegel supposedly said this to a student who mentioned a South-American plant that did not correspond to his concept of the plant.

[72.](#) Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy*, p. 172.

[73.](#) A pointed reading of this can also be found in Alenka Zupančič, *What is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 79.

[74.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, “Auszüge aus dem Tagebuch der Reise in die Berner Oberalpen, 25. Juli bis August 1796,” in *Werke*, Vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 614.

[75.](#) Ibid.

[76.](#) Ibid.

[77.](#) Ibid., p. 616

[78.](#) It might be worth recalling that the “call of nature” in German is often expressed by saying “ich muss mal” (“I need to”).

[79.](#) Hegel, “Auszüge,” p. 617.

[80.](#) Ibid., p. 618.

[81.](#) Ibid., p. 618.

[82.](#) Hegel, *Encyclopedia. Part I*, p. 217. But Hegel will indicate that because nature is the realm of the side-by-side [*Nebeneinander*], in it reign “necessity and contingency.” Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, p. 17.

[83.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, “Fragment of a System,” in *Miscellaneous Writings*, p. 152.

- [84.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 605.
- [85.](#) Hegel, “Fragment,” p. 153.
- [86.](#) Ibid.
- [87.](#) Ibid.
- [88.](#) Ibid.
- [89.](#) Ibid., p. 154. For a comment on this formulation in another context, cf. Rebecca Comay / Frank Ruda, *The Dash – The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), p. 43.
- [90.](#) There are numerous helpful reconstructions of this period, cf. for example the texts gathered in Dieter Henrich / Klaus Düsing (eds), *Hegel in Jena. Die Entwicklung des Systems und die Zusammenarbeit mit Schelling* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1980).
- [91.](#) Cf. Trevor H. Levere, *Hegel and the Earth Science, in Hegels Philosophie der Natur. Beziehungen zwischen empirischer und spekulativer Naturerkenntnis* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986), pp. 103–120.
- [92.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe I. Das System der spekulativen Philosophie* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1986), p. 183.
- [93.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III. Naturphilosophie und Philosophie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987), pp. 3f.
- [94.](#) Ibid., p. 52.
- [95.](#) Hegel himself speaks of the sun as “mother of the earth” and of the moon as “the ruler.” Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III*, p. 29.
- [96.](#) Cf. for example: Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London / New York: Verso, 2012), pp. 353ff.

[97.](#) Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III*, p. 27.

[98.](#) Johnston, *Prolegomena*, p. 28.

[99.](#) Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III*, p. 27.

[100.](#) Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy*, p. 72. In his discussion of Schelling, Žižek has made a highly important point, which clarifies the relation between what I described as that of nothing being there as nature and the other nothing that is the human being emerging within it. He claimed that “the true stumbling block to the idealization of the Real is not in nature but in man – it is with man that the hierarchical scale of progression, of intensification of powers, stumbles. Nature is a picture of a harmonious progression of life-forms, whereas the universe of man, of human history, offers the sad spectacle of a degenerate, poisoned nature, caught in a vicious cycle – man’s world is full of ruins.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* (London / New York: Verso, 2007), p. 58. The emergence of the nothing that is man is what destabilizes and thus denaturalizes, denothifies (apologies for this pun!) the nothingness that there was beforehand.

[101.](#) Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III*, p. 29.

[102.](#) Ibid., p. 52.

[103.](#) Because we are here on a quite abstract level, the room is filled by matter, but matter is but “pure force.” Ibid., p. 32.

[104.](#) John Burbidge, *Real Process: How Logic and Chemistry Combine in Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 4.

[105.](#) Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 461.

[106.](#) There are obvious leaps in the material I am discussing. I am mostly leaving aside the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for several reasons: I consider here mainly the type of material on the philosophy of nature that Hegel did not publish in book form (some he did publish

in the form of the encyclopedic teaching material, but most he did not publish at all). Also, the *Phenomenology* was conceived as an introduction to the system – at least for some time – and thus does stand in a peculiar position of being at the same time constitutive and superfluous for the latter. For an account of how Hegel's remarks about "observing nature" in the *Phenomenology* might contribute to an overall Hegelian philosophy of nature, cf. Johnston, *Prolegomena*, pp. 30–43. I will, however, subsequently return to the role that nature plays at the end of the *Phenomenology*.

[107.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, "The Philosophical Encyclopedia [for the Higher Class]," in *Philosophical Propaedeutic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 125.

[108.](#) Ibid., p. 126.

[109.](#) Ibid., p. 143.

[110.](#) Ibid., p. 127.

[111.](#) Cf. also Sebastian Rödl, "Thinking Nothing," *Problemi International*, 4, 2020 (ed. Mladen Dolar): 167–178.

[112.](#) Ibid., p. 143.

[113.](#) Ibid., p. 140.

[114.](#) Hegel will later in his life – in his philosophy of art – describe the relationship between concept and reality in such a way that the idea articulates this relationship, yet the *ideal* is what determines the precise (in)adequacy of their correspondence. This is to say that their relationship is not a given or stable one, rather it is one that is constitutively inappropriate. Cf. the pointed elaborations in G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst. Vorlesung von 1826* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), pp. 71–79.

[115.](#) Hegel, "The Philosophical Encyclopedia [for the Higher Class]," p. 142.

[116.](#) Ibid. And it is crucial that “life” is a concept that appears in the ontological logic and thus before the concept of nature appears.

[117.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 523. One might thus ask: How to conceive of the externalization of what we could describe as formalization of processes (absolute idea) that are themselves formative of formalizations (thought)? If thinking is always the finding of a form, the formalization of what does not have form and thus cannot formalize itself, can thinking ever be thought? In some sense, Hegel argues there is strangely something unthought in the very activation and practice of thought.

[118.](#) Cf. Žižek’s chapter in the present book.

[119.](#) Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, pp. 534f. Cf. for this also the elaboration in Malden Dolar, “The Phrenology of Spirit,” in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 64–83.

[120.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 54.

[121.](#) Dieter Henrich spoke of a “multiplicity ‘without spirit’” in nature. Cf. Dieter Henrich, “Hegels Theorie über den Zufall,” in *Hegel im Kontext* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 167. Instructive here is: John Burbidge, *Hegel’s Systematic Contingency* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[122.](#) Hegel, “The Philosophical Encyclopedia [for the Higher Class],” p. 142

[123.](#) Ibid.

[124.](#) Henrich, “Hegels Theorie über den Zufall,” p. 167.

[125.](#) Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 81.

[126.](#) Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London / New York: Verso, 1998), p. xiii.



[127.](#) Hegel, "The Philosophical Encyclopedia [for the Higher Class]," p. 143.

[128.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 58 and 56.

[129.](#) In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel describes the constitution of this step itself as a contingent and rather chaotic process: "the boundary line that *singles out*, for example, what is an elephant, an oak, gold, and the line between the *genus* and the *species* itself passes through many stages into the endless *particularization* of the chaotic range of animals and plants, mountain ranges, metals, earth, etc., such that it is only violence and artfulness which can first put them on view." Hegel, *Phenomenology*, pp. 144f.

[130.](#) Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, p. 230

[131.](#) Hegel's account of nature even appears to have things in common with "emergentism," cf. Johnston, *Prolegomena*, pp. 25f.

[132.](#) Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 174.

[133.](#) Hegel, "The Philosophical Encyclopedia [for the Higher Class]," p. 143.

[134.](#) Note that in 1808 mathematics is still the first of the natural sciences. In 1810, Hegel treats the system of particular sciences and also begins with mathematics; he repeats this in the *Encyclopedia* of 1817. But he stops doing in it 1818. Here is not the place to elaborate what this change ultimately implies. Cf. Walter Jaeschke, *Hegel-Handbuch: Leben-Werk-Schule* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010), pp. 331ff. Also cf. Karl Rosenkranz, *Hegels Naturphilosophie und die Bearbeitung derselben durch den italienischen Philosophen A. Véra* (Berlin: Effert & Lindtner, 1868), pp. 16f.

[135.](#) Hegel, "The Philosophical Encyclopedia [for the Higher Class]," p. 143.

[136.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 145.

- [137.](#) As Hegel puts it in the *Aesthetics*: “Man is an animal” and “because he knows he is an animal, he ceases to be an animal and attains knowledge of himself as spirit.” Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, p. 80.
- [138.](#) One could claim that the entire system is introduced and thus precipitated by a (self-effacing) philosophy of spirit (the *Phenomenology*) and thereby it is at work from the beginning. Cf. Comay/Ruda, *The Dash*.
- [139.](#) Benjamin Berger, “‘The Idea that *is*’: On the Transition from Logic to Nature in Hegel’s System,” in *Pli. The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (2019), *Hegel and the Sciences: Philosophy of Nature in the 21st Century*, p. 70.
- [140.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 29.
- [141.](#) Ibid., p. 33.
- [142.](#) Ibid., p. 37.
- [143.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik, Heidelberg 1817. Mitgeschrieben von F.A. Good* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1992), p. 9.
- [144.](#) It is important that Hegel remarks that the peculiar unity of being and nothing with which the *Logic* begins is never really left behind: “For from now on this unity of being and nothing will stand once and for all as foundation, as first truth, and will thus constitute the element of all that follows. All further logical determinations besides *becoming* itself (existence, quality, and in general all the concepts of philosophy) are therefore examples of this unity.” Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 62. For a reading of the doctrine of being, cf. Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel on Being* (London/Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2021). Also cf. Mladen Dolar, “Being and MacGuffin,” *Crisis and Critique: Hegel’s Today*, 4 (1), 2017: 82–101.
- [145.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 48. An extensive elaboration of the concept of the resolve and of the constitutive, yet exceptional status of the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic* – Hegel’s twins, his twin books – can be found in Comay/Ruda, *The Dash*.

[146.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 511.

[147.](#) This move does not imply an external critique, but “an effective refutation [which] must infiltrate the opponent’s stronghold and meet him on his own ground; there is no point in attacking him outside his territory and claiming jurisdiction where he is not. The only possible refutation of Spinozism can only consist, therefore, in first acknowledging its standpoint as essential and necessary and then raising it to a higher standpoint *on the strength of its own resources.*” Ibid., p. 512.

[148.](#) Ibid., p. 512.

[149.](#) Ibid., p. 513.

[150.](#) Ibid.

[151.](#) On the definition of concepts and judgments, also cf. Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Realm of Shadows. Logic as Metaphysics in The Science of Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), pp. 50ff.

[152.](#) This abbreviated account is somehow like saying every subject is an absolutely singular freak. As if a member of the *X-Men*. Everyone is a singular kind of mutant who is absolutely unique and in this uniqueness is what makes everyone into everyone else. But if the subject qua X-Man thinks, thought is also itself populated and inhabited by the X-Men that are the concepts – and this is ultimately where the uniqueness comes from. In different terms, subjects are absolutely singular freaks because they think in an absolutely unique way, which is what they share with all freaks. We are all unique freaks, and this is what we universally share, because we think. An insight that later psychoanalysis will unfold in new ways.

[153.](#) Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik*, p. 5.

[154.](#) On this term, which indicates that there is no given form for truly formative (even if formalizing) practices: Werner Hamacher, “Afformative, Strike,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction*

*and Experience*, eds Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 155–182.

[155.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 518.

[156.](#) Ibid., p. 670.

[157.](#) Ibid., p. 523.

[158.](#) Hegel in the *Logic* makes clear that the transition from subjectivity to objectivity does take the form of a syllogism, wherein the concept is posted as “something real, an existent [*Seiendes*].” Ibid., p. 626.

[159.](#) Ibid., p. 675.

[160.](#) Ibid., p. 735.

[161.](#) Ibid.

[162.](#) Ibid.

[163.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature. Part Two of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 6.

[164.](#) Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik*, p. 197.

[165.](#) Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel. Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (London / New York: Routledge 2005), p. 140.

[166.](#) Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik*, p. 197. The fall back into immediacy happens throughout in “absolute spirit.” Hegel for example claims about natural religion, so the first form of religion, that in its “first, immediate estrangement of self-knowing absolute spirit, its shape has the determination that corresponds to *immediate consciousness*, or to *sensuous-certainty*. It intuits itself in the form of *being*” and this (other-)being is natural. Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 398.

[167.](#) Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik*, p. 197.

[168.](#) Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel. Freedom, Truth and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 107.

[169.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 536. This passage appears to have been misinterpreted by McTaggart, who believes that nature's incompleteness is ultimately not an ontological claim about nature as such, but depends on the limited nature of our own intuition. Cf. J.M.E. McTaggart, *Studies in Hegelian Dialectic* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1910), p. 175. I am suggesting that it is the background against which one can understand Hegel's anecdotal "even worse for the facts."

[170.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 536.

[171.](#) For this trope that has been systematically elaborated inter alia by Slavoj Žižek also cf. Terrence Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (London / New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

[172.](#) Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, p. 23.

[173.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 736.

[174.](#) Ibid., p. 736.

[175.](#) Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, p. 43. An instructive contemporary reading of nature in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* can be found in Wes Furlotte, *The Problem of Nature in Hegel's Final System* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

[176.](#) On speculative sentences, words and signs, cf. Comay / Ruda, *The Dash*.

[177.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 745. For this see also: Christoph Menke, "Der 'Wendungspunkt' des Erkennens. Zu Begriff, Recht und Reichweite der Dialektik in Hegels *Logik*," in Christoph Demmerling, Friedrich Kambartel (Hg.), *Vernunftkritik nach Hegel. Analytisch-kritische Interpretationen zur Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 9–67.

[178.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 749.

[179.](#) In this sense, one can claim that the *Logic* formalizes thinking thinking thinking. Cf. on this also Comay/Ruda, *The Dash*.

[180.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 750.

[181.](#) Cf. for this Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2006).

[182.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 750.

[183.](#) Ibid., p. 752. Translation altered, F.R.

[184.](#) Ibid., p. 753. In German Hegel writes “*dieser nächste Entschluss*,” literally: this next resolve.

[185.](#) Cf. Comay / Ruda, *The Dash* on this. Syllogism in German is “*Schluss*”, *Entschluss* thus internally negates the syllogism. “*Schluss*” can also mean end, whereby with *Entschluss* we get an internal negation and something like an un-end.

[186.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 752. Hegel literally says: “It only remains here to indicate [*angedeutet*] this transition.”

[187.](#) Ibid., p. 753.

[188.](#) Pippin claims that “his actual specification of the transition to the *Philosophy of Nature* is difficult to understand.” Pippin, *Realm of Shadows*, p. 320. Quante argued that this transition “does not only belong to the opaque passages of Hegel’s system, but also to the most scolded. Already during his lifetime, his contemporaries judged this figure of thought as baseless and incomprehensible or even as symptom of the fundamental failure of this philosophy.” Michael Quante, *Die Wirklichkeit des Geistes. Studien zu Hegel* (Suhrkamp: Berlin, 2011), p. 116.

[189.](#) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 466.

[190.](#) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 466.

[191.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 47. On this also Comay / Ruday, *The Dash*, pp. 49f.

[192.](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 752.

[193.](#) Ibid., p. 753.

[194.](#) Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, p. 92.

[195.](#) *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature. Part Two of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences (1830)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[196.](#) Hegel, *Encyclopedia. Part I*, p. 303. The English translation makes it quite difficult to get that the idea releases itself from itself as nature and thereby generates precisely the kind of impression that led to all the idealist and metaphysical readings. In the 1830 version, Hegel uses "sich ... frei aus sich zu entlassen [to freely release itself from itself]." G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse [1830]*, Vol.1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 393.

[197.](#) *Encyclopedia* 1, p. 46.

[198.](#) Ibid., p. 303.

[199.](#) Which is why he can state that "[t]he *Philosophy of Nature* itself belongs to this part of return; for it is that which ... assures to Spirit the knowledge of its essence in Nature." *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 14.

[200.](#) Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 9. Translation modified.

[201.](#) *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 13.

[202.](#) As Hegel literally states: "nature is posited by spirit." Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 9. Translation modified.

[203.](#) *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 14.

[204.](#) Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 15. Translation modified.



### 3

## ***The Future of the Absolute***

“At a time when the universality of spirit has gathered such strength, and singularity, as is fitting, has become correspondingly less important ... the share of the total work of spirit which falls to the individual can only be very small ... less must be expected of him, just as he must expect less of himself, and may demand less for himself.” Hegel

### **Hegel Today**

In his inaugural lecture delivered at Heidelberg University in 1816, Hegel writes that “to draw Philosophy out of the solitude into which it has wandered – to do such work as this we may hope that we are called by the higher spirit of our time.” Nothing seems more paradoxical than the attempts to draw philosophy out of its solitude, a place in which it has always existed. Philosophy is, in one instance, the name of solitude. This attempt becomes an expression of lunacy or madness if one attempts to think about philosophy, or thinks philosophically, in the era of the supremacy of scientific thought over speculative thought, to name only one aspect. It appears as if philosophy has already lost its ground.

Philosophy has always been under attack, not by its double, but by other disciplines of thought, which doomed it to be not only unnecessary but also an obstacle to thinking about the contemporary present.

From Marx, through Lacan, and all the way to Stephen Hawking, thinkers have either announced the death of philosophy, or have declared an open war against it. Scientists announced its death because, in our era, it is the scientists rather than philosophers who are considered the bearers of knowledge. This is because philosophy did

not keep up with modern developments in science, and particularly in physics. It is easy to qualify Hawking's thesis as a banality, but philosophy almost gave up on asking "big" metaphysical questions. Hawking makes this claim in the very beginning of his book (on the nature of reality, where did all this that exists come from, et cetera), which according to him, once belonged to philosophical thinking: "scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge."<sup>1</sup> As a result, philosophy has "regressed" to discourse analysis, theories of argumentations, theories of democratic power ... And so on.

There are also Marxists who declared an open war on philosophy. Marx himself went as far as to argue that "philosophy and the study of the real world have the same relation to one another as onanism and sexual love."<sup>2</sup> This comes shortly after he announced the uselessness of philosophy: "philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it."<sup>3</sup> Marx's mistake here is not only conceptual, but also empirically wrong. Directed against Hegel, Marx's eleventh thesis misses the point, for the simple reason that Hegel never outlined, nor envisaged an ideal state. He never spoke of the future. It is safe to say that Hegel is the only philosopher who did not "give instructions as to what the world ought to be":

philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function. As the thought of the world, it appears only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its completed state. This lesson of the concept is necessarily also apparent from history, namely that it is only when actuality has reached maturity that the ideal appears opposite the real and reconstructs this real world, which it has grasped in its substance, in the shape of an intellectual realm. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.<sup>4</sup>

This cannot be read as the inauguration of Hegel's "right-wing" position, that is to say, "gray on gray" is another word for surrender to or acceptance of the Prussian monarchy. Gray is the period in between the sunset and sunrise. To "paint gray on gray" means to acknowledge the saturation of the present, because the story is always told at the end. Hegel is the philosopher who leaves the reality untouched. The reference to the Owl of Minerva is not a call for a passive reflection of actuality. Hegel's philosophical system is represented by this formula: the owl which flies at dusk is the retroactive summarization of the Absolute, but without assuming the point of finality. Hegel's thesis is that one can understand the present only after it is completed, when it reaches the point of decline, when it is "painted gray on gray." Philosophy grasps the totality of its age only when it has passed its time, when it is completed. That is, when a certain form of life has matured. The Absolute Knowledge is not an all-encompassing totality, because the very attempt to have an all-comprehensive destroys the totality itself. Philosophy can only grasp or understand the totality of the picture when the picture is no longer part of the actuality, but a rupture has happened in the fabric of history.

In this sense, the Owl of Minerva is the opposite of the Gallic rooster, a point which marks the radical difference between Hegel and Marx. Perhaps our time calls for the contemplative Owl, as opposed to the constant compulsion to act. Philosophy, which begins only at night, when the social life has ceased its daily activities, is nothing but the declaration of its truth. Hegel doesn't think the future, because, as some commentators wrote, it is always-already too late for the future.

The question "why Hegel?" remains pertinent. The twentieth century was profoundly anti-Hegelian (because it was Marxist? Or, worse, it was socialist?). Lenin was correct and his proposal to Marxist philosophers to create the "society of the materialist friends of Hegel"<sup>5</sup> remains actual. Perhaps, by returning to the materialist reading of Hegel, we can reclaim and resuscitate what is at stake in Marxist theory.<sup>6</sup> A materialist reading of Hegel is not necessarily a "materialist reversal,"

but materialism is already present in Hegel. Slavoj Žižek elaborated the distinction between idealism and materialism:

for the idealist, we experience our situation as “open” insofar as we are engaged in it, while the same situation appears “closed” from the standpoint of finality, that is, from the eternal point of view of the omnipotent and all-knowing God who alone can perceive the world as a closed totality; for the materialist, the “openness” goes all the way down, that is, necessity is not the underlying universal law that secretly regulates the chaotic interplay of appearances – it is the “All” itself which is non-All, inconsistent, marked by an irreducible contingency.<sup>7</sup>

From this standpoint, we can argue that in fact it is Marx who has to undergo a materialist reversal. While the entire history of Marxism is, in one level, a history of reversals, revivals, dismissals, modifications, the aim of this chapter is to discuss Hegel’s materialism. In doing this, I am not trying to engage in an academic exercise on what Marx inherited from Hegel, or into similar endeavors. Now that Marxism is nothing but a monument of the past, which presents neither a political nor an ideological threat, nor an “interesting” set of theoretical presuppositions (contemporary Left is anything but Marxist, in any sense of the word!), Hegel does not come to supplement Marxism with Hegel.

But, which Hegel is important for this particular chapter? There is an ongoing discussion on the “original sin” in Hegel’s work. Although this is a rather futile academic exercise, one nonetheless cannot ignore two important moments. German philosopher Heinrich Moritz Chalybäus, in what is still considered to be one of the best exposés on the thought of German Idealism, entitled *Historical Development of Speculative Philosophy, from Kant to Hegel*, for the first time proposed, perhaps even tentatively, to read Hegel’s dialectical process in the form of the infamous triad of: (1) thesis, (2) anti-thesis, and (3) synthesis. Or, as the German original has it: (1) in itself, (2) for itself, and (3) in itself and for itself.

The other moment, perhaps a bit earlier than Chalybäus, concerns the division or split between the Old and Young Hegelians. Each group privileged a certain reading, taking upon what they considered to be the cornerstone of the Hegelian system. The Old Hegelians appropriated the question of the State and Christianity, which the Young Hegelians considered to be ideological remainders of a system. Thus they focused on subjectivity and dialectics. The fate of Hegel thus cannot but puzzle everyone. If Hegel's fate had been left solely to the interpretations by Bauer, Feuerbach, and others, he would have been forgotten long ago; perhaps he would have had the fate of his immediate followers.

Isn't Althusser's position toward Hegel, in a certain sense, the embodiment of these two positions? In regard, but not reducible to his relation to Hegel only, it seems that he followed Chalybäus, who understood and conceptualized Hegel's dialectical process as a movement within thesis, anti-thesis and culminating in synthesis. It is (in fact, not so) surprising that Althusser joins the already established trend of proclaiming Hegel as the philosopher of the actuality, of rationalization and justification of the present order.

In Althusser's understanding, Hegel is a philosopher of closure and finitude. He thinks that the dialectical process, as conceptualized in Hegel, is always-already teleological. According to this understanding, the formula of reconciliation of thought with the actuality (i.e. the equivalence of reality with actuality), or of the relation of philosophy to actuality, presents a foreclosure in transcending the actual reality. The self-development of the Spirit always finds its reconciliation (or, limit) in the absolute.

## **Marx's Critique of Religion**

There is always a certain difficulty, not to say perplexity, when a materialist philosopher, that is to say an atheist, writes about religion. Rousseau warned us about this long ago, when he said that one accuses the other of being a philosopher, s/he excuses herself of being religious.<sup>8</sup> This difficulty arises and becomes even more complicated

when, from a position of what Lenin called “fighting materialist,” one has to struggle against the “return” of religious fundamentalism in all its forms: from Christian, Muslim, Jewish, up to new forms of spiritualism (which masks itself as a-religious), to New-Age Buddhism, and so on. Against this, many un-expected alliances can emerge alongside what Slavoj Žižek calls “new-age obscurantism.” Here, we Marxists should shamelessly join forces with “true” religious people against the madmen of fundamentalism and spiritualism.

In our epoch, religion is becoming an omni-potent force. The happy era of the dawn of belief, which resulted with the “permissive societies,” is clearly coming to an end. The historical materialist analysis is receding, operating with obscure terms, which rarely calls phenomena by their true name. The Left is in one of its most impotent positions for a very long time.

Why is obscurantism requiring us to move toward true religion? The reason why the Left seems to fall into such an impotent position when confronted with contemporary obscurantism is that, unlike the previous relation between religion and the secular world, it is the latter that currently follows from the former. That is, fundamentalism is incomprehensible if not seen as a response to secular Western values. This is why countering fundamentalism with already existing democratic and liberal values does nothing more than reinforce the very thing one is fighting against, insofar as obscurantism was produced as a reaction to the West. True secular thinking, Enlightenment at its best, was not a movement against religion, but an extraction of religion’s rational kernel, a subversion of true spirituality in the name of its continuation. This is why today, in order to fight fundamentalism, we should not look for an ally in democratic and liberal values, which themselves carry a good dose of idealist spirituality – as the “non-religious religiosity” to which Westerners can attest – but rather return to the original gesture of the Enlightenment, and find a subversive alliance with true and unabashed religiosity, which for centuries was the sole seat of universal and generic thinking. Therefore, the return of the theological dimension in the “post-secular” world is of structural necessity.

Žižek designated the role of religion in our era as *critical* or *therapeutic*. It is easy to account for the latter: in such cases, religion helps individuals to function in a society, gives them a Higher cause than the “daily pleasures,” fills up their lives with a Divine meaning. The former is more complicated, as it tries to articulate the popular discontents with the present order (to which, if we follow this path, religion takes up a heretic role).<sup>9</sup>

I will try to clarify how religion is always the other of philosophy, science, and politics. But, perhaps it is precisely because religion was always thought of as the other, the above-mentioned fields are now incapable of finding a materialist alliance with religion to fight the very *other of religion*, which is fundamentalism and New-Age spiritualism.

This is the point of departure from which we can think the philosophical and political consequences of Hegel’s and Marx’s engagement with religion, and more precisely with Christianity.

### ***The foundation of irreligious criticism***

Marxism has always had a particularly complicated relationship with religion.<sup>10</sup> Marx’s famous quote as religion being “the opium of the people” is usually taken as a sign that religion numbs critical sense, justifying historically determined social injustices through transcendental means. The full quote, however, is much more interesting than this:

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence, since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

Let us analyze it in detail. The first paragraph sets out the well-known Feuerbachian argument against the illusion of absolute transcendence. Feuerbach promoted the famous “promethean” thesis that religion is essentially a form of self-estrangement of human creative powers, an estrangement which, effacing its own origins, then confronts man as an alien force. As he writes in the concluding section of *The Essence of Christianity*:



We have shown that the substance and object of religion is altogether human; we have shown that divine wisdom is human wisdom; that the secret of theology is anthropology; that the absolute mind is the so-called finite subjective mind. But religion is not conscious that its elements are human; on the contrary, it places itself in opposition to the human, or at least it does not admit that its elements are human. The necessary turning-point of history is therefore the open confession, that the consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species; that man can and should raise himself only above the limits of his individuality, and not above the laws, the positive essential conditions of his species; that there is no other essence which man can think, dream of, imagine, feel, believe in, wish for, love and adore as the absolute, than the essence of human nature itself.<sup>12</sup>

Feuerbach's argument comprises two movements: first there is an exteriorization of man in his creations – his thoughts, dreams, imagination, feelings, beliefs, and desires live on outside of us – but then there is still a redoubling of this exteriorization – for the marks of having been created are not kept by the creation, which therefore “places itself in opposition to the human.” The critique of religion does not seek to undo its content, but rather to make it “admit that its elements are human,” thus completing the circle: religion makes man, but man made religion – and, therefore, man made man. And just as the self-estrangement of the human species in the form of religion leaves no trace of its origin – and is all the more effective for it – so does the suspension of this alienation leave no alien markings in the alienated creations as they are finally recognized as the historically produced essence of humanity.

It is worth noting that Feuerbach is not suggesting that by overcoming the illusion of absolute transcendence every man comes to recognize himself in the products of mankind, but rather that the domain that transcends us individually now itself appears as the historical product of the human species – it is a wholly natural and localized transcendence. In other words, this product of mankind's spiritual

efforts remains beyond the grasp of any given individual, but this does not mean that it is an absolute or metaphysically transcendent beyond, but rather the transcendence of the human species over each of us – a generic transcendence, which exceeds us personally without thereby constituting an autonomous or fully separate realm.

In the paragraph of *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx takes up this critical model – mediated, of course, by his own critique of Feuerbach. In his famous theses from 1845, he would state his supplementary “turn of the screw” in terms of a move from the abstract idea of the human genre – based on the passive fact that men naturally belong to the same genre – to the concrete existence of the species in concrete individuals,<sup>13</sup> who transform it through labor. Thus, the “generic being” [*Gattungswesen*] of man is no longer understood, as by Feuerbach, as an abstract point of view which, transcending individuals, nonetheless connects them together in a historically changing social whole, but rather as a situated dimension of human activity itself, an effective potency that realizes itself in man's concrete transformative relation to nature. As we change nature through labor, we also change our own species' determinations. For Marx, man is a generic being because he “makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness”:<sup>14</sup> insofar as we actively transform nature in accordance with our free will, we also transform our own human nature, since we are part of nature, and thereby concretely change ourselves – not as one individual separate from others, but as a species.

What takes place here is not so much a transformation of the model of critique proposed by Feuerbach, but a displacement of its point of incidence, from the abstract to the concrete, a shift that does bring about some important alterations to the previous model. By hypothesizing a natural or contemplative link between the individual man and his species, Feuerbach did not have to analyze the historicity of this very bond, that is, the way “‘religious sentiment’ is itself a social product”<sup>15</sup> and therefore did not tackle the question of why and how “the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an

independent realm in the clouds.”<sup>16</sup> The critique of religion still remains for Marx the critique of man’s self-estrangement from the standpoint of man’s generic capacity, but once it is aimed at the social production of the concrete existence of men, this critical standpoint has the additional task of explaining the detachment of the other world through the “cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis.” That is, the very activity of self-estrangement that constitutes religion as an autonomous and opposite realm to that of human action must itself be explained as a social human activity.

So, when we get to the famous quote from *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, we can recognize there, first of all, Marx’s use of the Feuerbachian critique of self-estrangement. Such is the sense of statements like “man makes religion, but religion does not make man.” But the affirmation that the social world conditions and determines the otherworldly nature of religion is not explained here by an innate or ahistorical religious tendency of mankind as such, but by the social conflicts of really existing societies: “this state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world.” In capitalist societies, it is the “inversive” character of the institution of private property, through which the worker confronts the products of his labor as “something alien, as a power independent of the producer,”<sup>17</sup> which conditions the “inverted consciousness of the world” that emerges with it.

But it is at this point – having understood that it is the alienated social relations in this world that redoubles itself in the alienated world of religion – that Marx’s critique goes into a strange praise of its object: “religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form” as well as “its spiritual *point d’honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis for consolation and justification.” The second part of this praise has a clearer critical sense underlying it, insofar as the inverted world of religion, mirroring the inverted social relations of domination, justifies and sanctions them by giving them a transcendental foundation. But what about the first part, in which

religion is presented as a “theory,” a “compendium,” and a popular “logic” of the world?

Here we must point out one intricate aspect of Marx’s presentation of the redoubling or mirroring of the secular in the religious world. We have already mentioned that Marx’s “correction” of the Feuerbachian critical model involved not hypothesizing the alienating relation that connects man to God, but rather affirming that this relation is in fact a social and historically determined relation, which is *then* redoubled as the relation between man and God: first man becomes estranged from other men, and only then this estrangement assumes the features of an alienation from human nature into the supernatural. But we must take a closer look at how this redoubling in fact takes place for Marx, because it involves a very particular sort of repetition.

When we look in the mirror, we see ourselves *plus* something we cannot see without the reflective surface: we see the world *with us in it*. Another way of putting it is that we see the world “without our absence” – that is, without that blind spot which marks our indelible immersion in it. The famous figure of “the double,” once popular in fantastic literature, and which Freud and Lacan later associated with the anguishing experience of the uncanny,<sup>18</sup> concerns precisely this “missing absence”: what if the reflected image were suddenly to start moving while I remained in the same position? The anguishing effect of the double – of someone other than me who is nonetheless me – is not that he is a poor copy of me who fools other people into believing his authenticity. The problem is that the double is effectively *more me than myself*: the blind spot from which I gaze at the mirror, this *absent* standpoint which at the same time marks my embedding in the world and divides me from it, is *absent* in the double: as I gaze at him, *I see myself fully embedded in the world* – more so than myself (insofar as I include this absent standpoint from which I see the double). My being in the world is marked by an alienation from this grasping at once my own being, as I am deprived from the capacity of seeing myself “from the outside,” but the double is constituted through the *alienation of this alienation*, the embedding of my image in the image of the world in a fit

more perfect than the one I experience within my own skin. And we find this same operation – through which an alienation is first marked as the presence of an absence, and then, through a redoubling, becomes a more fully constituted being – in the way Marx conceives the shift from social to religious alienation.

This comparison allows us to highlight that, in the passage from the precarious status of concrete men, alienated from their social production process and its results, to the redoubling of this alienation into a religious sphere, this social condition is not made invisible, but rather *made even more visible*. Religion portrays man's relation to God in the same alienated terms in which man relates to other men in this world, but precisely because of the very form of this redoubling, the repetition of this content *adds consistency to it* – that is, adds something that is missing in social reality, namely, the visibility of the worker to himself. Insofar as the social relations of production necessary for the very existence of men alienate the producers from themselves – an alienation that is marked by a loss or recognition – the mirroring of this alienation in a religious realm, just like in the case of the double, includes something in this “fantastic” picture that is missing in reality, namely, the absent or negative standpoint from which the worker experiences the estrangement from his own production. While in reality the alienated ones are deprived of what transcends them, in the transcendent world the alienated and the alienating force are both featured as parts of the same realm. Something missing in reality is missing in religion, which is why, from the standpoint of “the fantastic reality of heaven,” man relates back to his concrete being as “the mere appearance of himself, the non-man [*Unmensch*]”<sup>19</sup> – just like how, when confronted with my double, it is me, with my alienated immersion in the world, who seem to have all telling signs of a bad unauthentic copy.

However, this process of redoubling does not only qualify religion as the “universal basis for consolation and justification” by creating a standpoint from which the precariousness of the world becomes the index of its own illusory and vacuous essence. Insofar as the redoubling

“positivizes” this imperfect or lacking dimension of the world, it creates a *mapping* relation between the social and the otherworldly realms. It is this mapping, through which two sets of the same “logic” are correlated, which leads Marx to also refer to religion as a “theory of the world.” Here, the fact that the secular is constituted as the inessential and the religious as the essential poles of this correlation is secondary to the fact that a correlation between the two is established. It is from the perspective of this bijective relation – conditioned by the inversive character of repetition – that religion can be understood as an “encyclopedic compendium” of the secular world. This is not so much a point about the general model of critique based on the critique of religion – the “foundation of irreligious criticism” – as an entry point to approach religion itself as a *model* of social relations.

At stake here is the meaning of Marx’s characterization of religion as this world’s “logic in *popular form* [*populärer Form*].” Rather than the trivial suggestion that religion has popular appeal because it promises us life after death, or tells us that we have eternal souls, Marx is affirming something about the *form* in which the logic of the world is expressed in religion: somehow, this redoubled map of our social relations, due to its very redoubling, manages to make these same alienated relations *legible for everyone*. While in the “secular basis” the form of alienation entails “cleavages and self-contradictions” in the worker – since *he is and is not* the producer of his products – in the duplicated world of religion the creator and the creation are transcendently opposed to each other: a self-contradiction *is pictured as an opposition*, in a formal shift that not only preserves but rather makes the content *more consistent*. As we previously mentioned, this makes alienation *more* rather than less visible for the alienated worker himself – at the cost of separating him from his own condition, yes: but isn’t this separation between thinker and what is thought a characteristic of theory in general?

This question leads us, finally, to the last part of Marx’s quote:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.<sup>20</sup>

Usually this statement is read backwards, starting from our understanding of the last metaphor and backtracking toward the problem of suffering. Opiates make suffering bearable, therefore religion is a form of coping with our real suffering – and since drugs make suffering bearable by providing us with an escape, religion must do the same, numbing us from our pain. But, as we have seen, this reading does not capture the way religion in fact *stages* our alienating social relations for us to see. Rather than explain the meaning of “religious suffering” through the opium metaphor, we should rather begin from the perplexing definition of this suffering as being “at one and the same time the *expression* (...) and a *protest* against real suffering” in order to arrive at what aspect of the metaphor is really being highlighted.

This dual character of religious suffering – being *the same* as real suffering, that is, its expression, while being *the opposite* of it, a protest against it – is clearly conditioned by the operation we have been tracking here, and which Marx considers constitutive of religious consciousness. The inversive redoubling of negative alienation in this world into a positive marking of another world does *express* one’s precarious condition while at the same time being its very opposite: a repetition – on the one hand, our production confronts us as an alien power, on the other, God confronts us as an alien power – but an *overcoming* nonetheless – since, from the standpoint of this transcendental power of God, we see ourselves as non-alienated men. What is at first enigmatic, however, is that the structure of religious suffering is presented here in the same terms as the structure of a “general theory of the world.” But how can suffering, insofar as it both expresses and opposes itself to the world, be structured as a theory?

### ***The mist-enveloped regions of the religious world***



Marx's writings also have a complicated relation to politics itself. Even though scissions like the one proposed by Louis Althusser – dividing the “humanist” from the “scientific” phases in his work – are surely useful, none of these proposals substitutes the historical scissions which confronted Marx throughout his life: a first “event,” when in 1842 he found himself “in the embarrassing position of having to discuss what is known as material interests”<sup>21</sup> regarding the case of forest thefts and the division of landed property; the failure, in 1848, of the so-called “Springtime of the Peoples” and the subsequent proclamation of Louis Bonaparte as emperor; the 1857 financial crisis – arguably the first worldwide economic crisis – with its social and political effects in Britain; and the emergence of the Paris Commune in 1871.

Each of these events brought about important changes to Marx's thinking. The “young Hegelianism” of his student years was shattered in 1842 by the intrusion of the problem of survival, of men's need to produce their own means of subsistence – a question that oriented Marx's early critique of private property and his take on man's universality as a concrete consequence of our transformative relation to nature in general and our own nature in particular. A whole view on work, humanity and the future of the poor was constructed upon this first critique of private property. But Marx's writings on the limits of right and the state were later confronted by the failure of the 1848 revolutions – and, especially, by the emergence of a new emperor through the very democratic means supposed to bring the working class's interests into direct conflict with the bourgeoisie's. The critique of political economy acquired a new place in the following years of Marx's studies: rather than focusing on the relation between civil society and the state, we see a shift toward the infra-structure of civil society itself, in the problem of value and commodity production. This is the time of Marx's deepened critical studies of the classical economists, leading him to a first presentation of the theory of surplus value, and a renewal of his political theory. But nothing in the works of classical bourgeois economists could have anticipated the paradoxical fact that a crisis in the very economic structure responsible for exploitation and inequality could serve to reinforce, rather than



destroy, its functioning. This was, however, what the 1857 economic crisis brought to view. In order to respond to it, Marx had to devise a new entry point into his critique of political economy – one in which the “limits” of capital functioned as internal rather than external ones, a shift with deep consequences for the understanding of value, production, international relations, and the role of the state. It was surely this new view on the global dimension of capitalism that made Marx at first irresponsive to the outbreaks of the communes in 1871 – since these confronted the global panorama of Marx’s work with local political resistance. But if Marx was surely not going to drop his analysis of the globalized economic network of capitalism, the new sequence of political struggles in the 1970s did nonetheless pose the question of the “timelines” of capitalist development: was industrialization truly a necessary step in the passage from the communal properties of feudal life to a post-capitalist egalitarian society? In these years, even though Marx was not to publish any other works, he furthered his understanding of non-capitalist social formations – a study emblematically exemplified by his correspondence in 1881 with the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich.

Each of these different sequences in Marx’s thinking brought about important changes in his conceptual framework. But our interest in this section is just to highlight the different roles that his interlocution with Hegel took on throughout these shifts, as they point to the insistence of a precise problem at the heart of Marx’s critique of capitalism.

As we analyzed in some detail in the previous section, at early stages of his work, Marx linked the critique of capitalism to the critique of religion – in a double sense. First of all, following Feuerbach, the critique of religion meant the undoing of mystifications that naturalized social relations of domination, that is, which made the “inverted world” brought about by capitalist property relations consonant with our consciousness. But it also meant, against Feuerbach, a critical outlook of social relations in capitalism attentive to how these same relations produce and reproduce these mystifications in the first place. It is this second aspect of “irreligious criticism” that structures the series of

displacements with which Marx understands the “research program” of 1842–1851:

It is, therefore, the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus, the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.<sup>22</sup>

If Feuerbach came to Marx’s aid in order to undo “the other-world of truth,” it is the ensuing “criticism of Earth” that truly characterizes Marx’s own thinking. But, as we have also seen, the way Marx approaches the problem of “self-estrangement in its unholy forms” appears as an *extension of*, rather than as a break with, the critique of religion. So, when one shifts “the criticism of religion” into the criticism of law and property relations – the basis for the worker’s alienation from his productions – and the “criticism of theology” into the criticism of political representation – the basis for the worker’s invisibility as an orienting force of society – these displacements still take the form or model of the original Feuerbachian critique of self-estrangement. That is, they still take the form of a denouncing of the way *abstract* relations in fact stand for *concrete* non-relations – property rights ensure the worker’s expropriation, political representation ensures his political impotence.

The movement from the abstract to the concrete – from the ideal to the real, from the divine to the human – was the principal dynamic of the Marxian model of critique, its objects were the “criticism of law” and the “criticism of politics,” in sum, while it focused on the relation between labor and property, or civil society and the state.

However, when we juxtapose the way religion functions as a negative of critique in this theoretical sequence to the way it re-emerges in Marx’s most well-known work, and more specifically, the most well-known chapter of that work, the section *The Fetishism of Commodities and the*

*Secret Thereof* from the first volume of *Capital*, a crucial shift seems to have taken place. Here, Marx is no longer discussing how the products of labor appear as an alien power, acquiring an essential *difference* from their producers, a proprietary difference, but rather how products of labor become *equivalent* to each other – and ultimately to the producers themselves – the equivalence between commodities. In order to explain this impossible homogeneity between concretely distinct products and processes of production, Marx makes use, first, of an analogy with physics:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things, which are at the same time supra-sensible or social. In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between physical things. As against this, the commodity form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.<sup>23</sup>

The problem Marx is trying to render legible is a central one. If we take the standpoint of what is concrete taking place at the production process – if we enter a factory and see what we find there – nowhere are the social relations that truly condition this process visible: we

don't find inequality anywhere, no social relations appear, but rather equally self-serving individuals, putting their private properties to use – be this one's own labor force, or previously bought means of productions, such as machines, etc. But from the standpoint of property we cannot even find the reason why the capitalist would prefer to invest his money into other property – laborers, rent, machinery, etc. – if the end product would be worth the sum of the money he spent. So, the very reason for being of the factory is not visible, and so is not the reason why this process begets more money than the money invested in it. It is only from the standpoint of the exchange of products – that is, from the products of labor taken as commodities – that the social relations at stake in the very production process become themselves legible. It is only by considering labor as a commodity – therefore not only something a laborer possesses, but something which, like any other commodity, is consumed in accordance to its use value and exchanged for the cost of its reproduction – that the social relation between workers, their distinction from those who buy the labor-commodity, the production of surplus-value, etc., are expressed. In other words, if we take the standpoint of the “relation between people,” between concrete individuals, social relations are effectively invisible – substituted by property relations, which are immediate and equal, and therefore explain nothing of the production process itself – while if we take the standpoint of “relation between things,” between commodities, the social relations between people are suddenly expressed – at the cost of making concrete individuals “invisible.” Marx must explain, therefore, the logic of process through which social relations acquire “qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.”

He turns to physics here, proposing an analogy with light. We see things lit because light hits our eyes, but even though the “being” of the thing seen depends on a relation between the eye and the thing, that is, of light hitting the thing and then our eyes, we confront these things as separate from us, “not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself.” The analogy is therefore: social relations appear as social things outside the

subjects of this relation just as the relation between eye and what is seen appears as an objective thing outside the eye. But at this point Marx points out the limit of the analogy: in the case of the eye, “there is a physical relation between physical things,” that is: the eye, the thing been seen and the light hitting both the eye and the object are all materially homogeneous – all the elements in this process are physical. “But it is different with commodities.” Why? Because the relation at stake here is heterogenous to the things it relates: “the existence of the things qua commodities (...) [has] absolutely no connection with their physical properties.” In the case of light, we can deduce properties about light by analyzing the objects it relates to: because light in fact interacts with objects, being part of the same material world as they are, at a truly infinitesimal level, it can be seen that it exerts force over the objects it hits, or produces heat or excites the optic nerve. On the other hand, the exchange relation between commodities “do not contain an atom of use value”<sup>24</sup> – that is, they are *indifferent* to the concrete and material substratum of the things being related. Nothing about value can be deduced by looking at what is concretely put into relation through value relations – however, it is only from the standpoint of these relations that the social relations between concrete people and things becomes visible. So while there is “a definite social relation between men” this relation assumes for them “the fantastic form of a relation between things.” The term that is not captured by the physical metaphor is “fantastic”: it implies that information is *lost* when we only accept the existence of material and concrete things and people – it is not a mere perceptible distortion, like a transcendental illusion which structures our visual field, but “concretely” plays no part in the behavior of light and sight. The “fantastic” aspect of this process concerns the fact that, if we try to move from the distortion back to the “concrete” process, *we also lose the causal enchainment which truly structures these concrete components*. At this point, Marx makes a novel use of religion, clearly distinct from the critical model based on Feuerbach:

In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.<sup>25</sup>

The “mist-enveloped regions” of religion are called upon here, not as a model of what is to be criticized, but rather as a model of how social relations truly function in capitalism – as a fantastic domain, which effectively transcends us, to the point that, without assuming the existence of this transcendental or supernatural standpoint, the legibility of concrete and localized social relations themselves is compromised. Considering how central the critique of religion was to the constitution of Marx's own critical stance, it is worth pondering over the fact that Marx here claims that, in order to account for the reality of the value form we “must have recourse” to religion. What exactly is the status of this necessity?

There seems to be a strange enlargement of the scope of materialism in the passage from Feuerbach to early Marx, and then to the standpoint of *Capital*. At first, Feuerbach proposed that a materialist position would recognize that the religious form operates an *illusory alienation* through which our own productions appear to us as autonomous or other-worldly – which is why the spiritual overcoming of this illusion would reveal that human species itself is the source and site of our self-transcendence. Marx then claimed that this relation of alienation is not an illusion, but rather a redoubling of a very real form of social alienation, through which workers are materially deprived of the products of their labor – alienation is not the essential religious phenomenon, for it is conditioned by the social reality of alienation, the essential dimension of religion would rather be *the illusory separation* that this alienated sphere then acquires in regards to real social life.

Finally, with the shift from property relations to the problematic of value, this separation itself is recognized as part of the social world, since the logic of value *is materially separated from its own material substratum*. What is then religion as a form? It is true that Marx does refer in *Capital* many times to capitalism or aspects of it as religious-like, for example, in the third volume, when he writes:

It is the great merit of classical economics to have dissolved this false appearance and deception, this autonomization and ossification of the different social elements of wealth vis-à-vis one another, this personification of things and reification of the relations of production, this religion of everyday life.<sup>26</sup>

But to say that the way social wealth is falsely hidden from us in capitalism under the illusory “personification of things and conversion of production relations into entities” makes it the “religion of everyday life” is not to criticize religion, but rather to critique capitalism in its religion-like features. It is hard to miss that an inversion has taken place here: it is not religion that is being attacked for aiding the reproduction of a veiled social structure, it is rather this social structure that is being represented as a religion. And so, once again, religion appears not as the object of critique, but as a model of the world.

Some authors, most notably Walter Benjamin, define this new relation between social structure and religion as a direct identity: capitalism *is a religion*.<sup>27</sup> That is, the reason why Marx would *need* to resort to a reference to the “mist-enveloped regions” of religious phenomena in order to account for the social form of a commodity-producing society is because this society is nothing but a “pure religious cult”<sup>28</sup> – there is therefore no modeling of social relations through religious ones: in capitalism these two would be one and the same thing. Productive as this reading may be – and it does allow us to move beyond the paradigm that treats religion as the realm of ineffective illusions – it does not account for one main difference between religion and capitalism: that capitalist social relations are somehow *clarified* by being exposed as religious, while religious life gains nothing when compared to religion itself. This is the point upon which we have

previously touched, when we analyzed the ambivalent status of the redoubling of social alienation into transcendental alienation: if capitalism is *immediately* a religion, then why are capitalist social relations passive of being redoubled – and, through this process, made *more visible* – as other-worldly relations?

What is missing for capitalism to truly be a religion (and not merely function *as* a religion) is precisely the capacity to serve as the model of something else, to function as a mediation that can be handled as such. Unlike religion, when capitalism becomes the model of something other than itself – say, of human interactions outside the productive sphere, which can be thought in terms of investments, risk, property relations, etc. – it is in fact already in the process of encompassing what it represents into itself, perpetually moving back toward being the thing in need of representation.

This brings us back to Marx's analysis of the commodity form in the first chapter of *Capital*. If the recourse to religion as a model of sociality was not necessary because capitalism is itself a religion, then what accounts for this new position of religious phenomena in Marx's critical apparatus? Precisely the fact that religion has the *form of a model*: when materialism needed a model for alienation, religion offered one, though social alienation is itself a materialist category, when materialism needed a model for the autonomization of abstractions, religion also served as a double, though the value form is in fact a real abstraction, a historically constituted domain, which nonetheless transcends those who support it.

We come thus to the conclusion that, behind the program of an "irreligious criticism," modeled after the critique of religion and theology, there lies not an unveiling of religion's role in the constitution and maintenance of capitalism (though nothing prevents such a social analysis of its religious institutions) but rather the slow recognition that religion offers itself as a stage capable of making capitalist relations visible, a form capable of *signifying* these social relations, and therefore a condition for criticizing them.



## ***Hegel and Christianity***

We come, thus, to the perplexing situation of recognizing in religion a condition for the critique of ideology and ideological mystifications. But how could it be that the critique of beliefs necessarily passes through belief itself? This is precisely the thesis elaborated by Žižek. The premise of the *Puppet and the Dwarf* (and of his entire “Christian materialist” project) is the following:

What we are getting today is a kind of “suspended” belief, a belief that can thrive only as not fully (publicly) admitted, as a private obscene secret. Against this attitude, one should insist even more emphatically that the “vulgar” question “Do you really believe or not?” matters – more than ever, perhaps. My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible only to a materialist approach – and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.<sup>[29](#)</sup>

The structure of this proposal is deceptively simple, for in fact it proposes two contradictory movements: to produce a materialist reading of Christianity – that is, to produce a materialist theory of belief that doesn’t coincide with its immediate notion – and to reform dialectical materialism itself through the consideration of Christianity – that is, to demonstrate that the Christian religious experience poses a challenge to materialism that calls for its reinvention. These are seemingly circular tasks, and therefore impossible: how can we produce a materialist reading of Christianity if this reading itself is supposed to change what we mean by “materialist,” and therefore affect the way we read Christianity to begin with?

The way out of this circularity was already well-known to Hegel, a philosopher who was troubled by the question of foundations and beginnings in all matters speculative. For Hegel, there is a twist in this circular relation between rational thinking and the religious

experience, an asymmetry that is in fact what characterizes Christianity to begin with, namely, the way Christianity stages the limit of belief within its own faith. The title of “revealed” religion is merited for Christianity not because it reveals a religious truth, but rather because it stages the truth of religion *as such*, showing us that the suspension of belief has the structure of a belief – a “barren belief,” so to speak. This is why, already in his *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel proposes a strange continuity between the “Historical Good Friday” – the death of God within Christian faith – and the “Speculative Good Friday” – the doing away with God in rational thinking:

But the pure concept of infinity as the abyss of nothingness in which all being is engulfed, must signify the infinite grief [of the finite] purely as a moment of the supreme Idea, and no more than a moment. Formerly, the infinite grief only existed historically in the formative process of culture. It existed as the feeling that “God Himself is dead,” upon which the religion of more recent times rests; the same feeling that Pascal expressed in so to speak sheerly empirical form: “*la nature est telle qu’elle marque partout un Dieu perdu et dans l’homme et hors de l’homme.*” [Nature is such that it signifies everywhere a lost God both within and outside man.] By marking this feeling as a moment of the supreme Idea, the pure concept must give philosophical existence to what used to be either the moral precept that we must sacrifice the empirical being (*Wesen*), or the concept of formal abstraction [e.g., the categorical imperative]. Thereby it must re-establish for philosophy the Idea of absolute freedom and along with it the absolute Passion, the speculative Good Friday in place of the historic Good Friday. Good Friday must be speculatively re-established in the whole truth and harshness of its God-forsakenness. Since the [more] serene, less well grounded, and more individual style of the dogmatic philosophies and of the natural religions must vanish, the highest totality can and must achieve its resurrection solely from this harsh consciousness of loss, encompassing everything, and ascending in all its earnestness and out of its deepest ground to the most serene freedom of its shape.<sup>[30](#)</sup>

So Hegel provides us with an entry point into the Žižekian encounter between materialism and religion: while the religious or idealist undertones of materialism cannot be directly accessed by materialism itself, the materialist core of the religious experience is itself thematized within Christianity, and, in particular, in the special role the death of God takes in it. We could venture that the death of God is the point in which the two sides of a circle cross, as in a Möebius band, and the materialist kernel of religion motivates a reformed dialectical materialism, in which the other side of this same “twist” can now be found, since it is a materialism which can now account for the general theory of barren beliefs, that is, for the effective structure of belief’s separation from the believer in general.

Therefore, in his return to Hegel, Žižek is also recuperating a view of religion that in fact recognizes within Marxism an “underlying current” that was already dormant in it, namely, the understanding that the space of representation – of the discourse that models the world – is itself inconsistent and passes over into that which it models. This, in fact, is one of Hegel’s most important ideas in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the true turning point of the passage between Christianity and speculative thinking. Hegel is essentially a superficial thinker: all his philosophy is dedicated to emptying out the “beyond” of any substance, doing away with all essentialist dualisms – or, as mentioned in the above quote, a thinker who tries to carry out the task of accepting “the whole truth and harshness” of the world’s “God-forsakenness.” But if this is the case, then Hegel cannot criticize mystifications from the standpoint of the de-mystified, or representations from the standpoint of the underlying reality. He has himself willingly thrown away the philosopher’s main tool of critique and therefore should accept the title that has been given to him by most of his commentators – Marx included – of being a great idealist, committed to the all-encompassing surface of ideas. But this understanding of Hegel leaves out the other side of his gesture, for the emptying out of the world’s “depth” correlates with the recognition that its superficiality is “bent” or “twisted”: it contains sites where what is becomes its own negation. And so another way out of religious thinking opens up: not “beyond,”

“beside,” or “behind” it, but through its own immanent inconsistency, the site where representation undermines itself, becoming its other. For Hegel this is precisely what happens with the passion of Christ – and in a double sense – since it is both the first religious experience of the inner limit of religion *and* the first non-religious thinking of the existence of such contradictory sites within representation in general. The Passion therefore does not only locate the point where representation touches on its other – were this its limit, Christianity would be an ode to the “unrepresentable” – but it also empties out the substance of this otherness by rendering it co-extensive with rational thinking:

in the Christian Revelation, no one comes towards us, nothing comes out of this manifestation, it does not *show* anything. Nothing, except that now the relations “referred/referrent,” “signifier/signified” do not have a continuation. God does not *become* manifest: he *is*, side by side, *für sich seiende Manifestation*. What is unveiled, if one still wants to use this term, is only that there was the necessity of appearing in Him, in the very strict sense of being-for-an-Other, the impossibility of being totally “Him” in the case of remaining solely “in Himself” [...] On the other hand, if one no longer imagines God as an objectifiable content, one also does not incur the risk of splitting him between His *essence* and His *appearance*, His *before* and His *after*.<sup>31</sup>

Returning to Žižek’s materialist theory of religion, we can now understand why he explicitly says: “since Hegel was the philosopher of Christianity, it is no wonder that a Hegelian approach to Christ’s death brings out a radical emancipatory potential.”<sup>32</sup> At the beginning of his *The Fear of Four Words*, after quoting Chesterton at length, Žižek puts forward the axiom of his Hegelian reading of Christianity:

The axiom of this essay is that there is only one philosophy which thought the implications of the four words [“He Was Made Man”] through to the end: Hegel’s idealism – which is why almost all philosophers are also no less frightened of Hegel’s idealism.<sup>33</sup>

In his Seminar VII, Lacan opposes the thesis of the “death of God,” arguing that God was dead from the very beginning, but only in Christianity he is self-aware of that. He refers to Hegel when he speaks about a “certain atheistic message in Christianity itself.” But, which God dies and what are the consequences? Žižek argues that God has to die twice: in Judaism “in itself,” whereas in Christianity God dies “for itself.” And this is the true atheistic dimension of “Christianity as the ‘religion of atheism’”: God cannot be directly negated, it is the subsequent erasure of the individual that sets the Holy Spirit free from its embodiments, that sublates God into a virtual fiction sustained only by the collective of believers.”<sup>34</sup>

It is at this point that the relevance of a “return to Hegel” makes itself felt, because, from the standpoint of his Hegelian-inspired Marxist theory of belief, the critique of belief does *not* take the form of an increasing passivity or a retreat from those practices that are structured by beliefs – rather, the critique of the belief in God *has the form of a collective practice*. It is the immediate, passive engagement with reality that appears, from Žižek’s standpoint, as the idealist – secretly social – commitment to fantasies, ideals, and mystifications, while the active, collective engagement with practices that are explicitly mediated by abstractions that have the potential to empty out the substance of these mediations, producing true critical effects. Rather than turn from religion to “social practice,” as the orthodox Marxist analysis suggests, Žižek’s Marxism transposes the full Hegelian passage between religion and speculative thinking into the relation between religious practice and materialism: just as Reason generalizes and radicalizes the “infinite grief” of the “historical Good Friday” by emptying out every “beyond” of its substance, so would materialism preserve and radicalize religious collective practice by emptying out every belief of its substantial mediator.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes:

The death of the Mediator [that is, Christ] is the death not only of his natural aspect or of his particular being-for-self, not only of the already dead husk stripped of its essential Being, but also of the *abstraction* of the divine Being. For the Mediator, in so far as his death has not yet completed the reconciliation, is the one-sidedness which takes as *essential* Being the simple element of thought in contrast to actuality: this one-sided extreme of the Self does not as yet have equal worth with essential Being; this it first has as Spirit. The death of this picture-thought contains, therefore, at the same time the death of the *abstraction of the divine Being* which is not posited as Self.<sup>35</sup>

However, in the *Philosophy of History*, he gives a slightly distinctive presentation:

The followers of Christ, united in this sense and living in the spiritual life, form a community which is the Kingdom of God. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name" (that is, in the determination of that which I am) – says Christ – "there am I in the midst of them." The community is the real and present life in the Spirit of Christ.<sup>36</sup>

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that God emerges only through his loss (the dialectic of supposing and presupposing that Hegel relies on) and this loss is fully consummated in the Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup> The Holy Spirit is kept alive only through the interaction of the individuals; it is a virtual Substance (which should not be confused with Hegel's "objective spirit" *qua* virtual substance), which exists when the people recognize themselves in it (the Communist Party, psychoanalytic institutions/societies, amorous couples, et cetera). In short, this is the most radical form of atheism: one doesn't proclaim the inexistence of God, but it is God himself who proclaims it, makes us believe in his inexistence. It is in this point that the truly materialist dimension of Christianity emerges, a materialism that is concerned with the form of the life of the collectivities.

This Hegelian–Žižekian view of religion as a self-sublating process, out of which atheism is born, allows us to imagine a different sort of critique of fundamentalisms – one that doesn’t attack fundamentalism by referring back to the “fundaments” or “foundations” (*Grund*), since that is exactly what fundamentalisms already do. Instead, Hegel provides us with an alternative form of critique, one which seeks in the rational kernel of religious thinking an ally against mystification and obscurantism in both religious and secular forms.

## Theory of the State

This brings us to a crucial moment in Hegel’s thought, one that would continue to haunt his philosophy and its aftermath: the division, or split, between the Old and Young Hegelians. Each group privileged a certain reading and assumption regarding that which they took to be the cornerstone of the Hegelian system. The Old/Right Hegelians appropriated the question of the state and Christianity from Hegel’s philosophy, which, by contrast, the Young Hegelians deemed to be ideological remainders within his system. These latter focused instead on subjectivity and dialectics. So, perhaps the correct path to take in this endeavor would be to follow the tradition of Žižek and others in rehabilitating or appropriating what is crucial in Hegel’s philosophical system: the state.

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel provides a series of definitions of the state. In the opening sentence of the chapter on the state, he writes:

“The state is the actuality of the ethical Idea.”<sup>38</sup> This can also be formulated as “the actuality of concrete freedom.”<sup>39</sup> Philosophically, however, the most compelling definition is the one referred to earlier, which is worth quoting at length: The state consists in the march of God in the world, and its basis is the power of reason actualizing itself as will.<sup>40</sup>

This definition best epitomizes what the Young Hegelians abhorred most in Hegel. This can also be seen in the Marxist critique of Hegel’s teleology, construed as a dialectical process that swallows everything



and culminates in a rationalization of the present. Louis Althusser's anti-Hegelian Marxism stands as the best example of this. Althusser accused Hegel of a teleological understanding of both nature and society – taken to be the natural outcome of his metaphysical idealism. Althusser spoke against Hegel's pretensions to know the entire universe, the absolute, and thus of reaching/attaining an absolute knowledge (the truth of the Absolute). Perhaps Althusser would have been all too happy to "prove" his point with reference to a letter Hegel sent to his friend Niethammer:

I adhere to the view that the world spirit has given the age marching orders. These orders are being obeyed. The world spirit, this essential, proceeds irresistibly like a closely drawn armored phalanx advancing with imperceptible movement, much as the sun through thick and thin. Innumerable light troops flank it on all sides, throwing themselves into the balance for or against its progress, though most of them are entirely ignorant of what is at stake and merely take head blows as from an invisible hand.

Žižek is right to argue, against Althusser, that "it is difficult to imagine a more 'arrogant' philosopher than Spinoza, whose *Ethics* claims to reveal the inner workings of God-Nature; if nothing else, it can be demonstrated that here Spinoza is much more 'arrogant' than Hegel."<sup>41</sup> Or, if one formulates his shortcomings in a different way – one that, at the same time (albeit at another level) discerns the shortcomings of anti-Hegelianism – one can argue that what Althusser "was not able to think was the capitalist universe 'structured like the Spinozan absolute,' i.e., the reemergence of Spinoza as the paradigmatic thinker of late capitalism."<sup>42</sup>

But, back to Hegel. The Hegelian theory of the concrete universal – of something that stands for the whole *within* the whole, even more so than the abstract apprehension of its totality – was fully deployed in Hegel's work, both in his understanding of Christianity and in his ontology, where the relation between a concept's extension and its exception turns out to be the relation between the concept's *formal* and *concrete* existences. In his social theory, however, Hegel took a more



“formalist” perspective. He took the concrete establishment of social rules by the state – the means of regulating the interaction between private volitions in civil society – to be the expression and realization of the very concept of volition, and hence to stand for the concrete universal of society as such. This view, in which historical existence was as real as the rational existence of the state, was then subverted by Marx, who – in line with the materialist turn of his time – recognized an impasse in Hegel’s deployment of the articulation between civil society and the state. Rather than taking the state to serve as the concrete measure for the concept of what humanity is at a given historical moment, Marx took up Feuerbach’s theory of generic being to argue that it is in the very concrete activity of labor that men make their essence objective. This is a process that is extrinsically and formally deviated and deformed by state laws of property, which alienate workers from participation in and realization of their historical existence.

The young Marx, therefore, is not so much concerned with “forgetting” Hegel. He employs a completely different logic, which, as will be developed below, moves in the direction of the concrete universality, which at the end would not allow him to read Hegel’s conception of the state. Marx takes a completely different turn in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, especially with regard to the conception of the state as the “march of God in the world.” His failure to properly grasp Hegel’s notion of the state corresponds to the failure to understand it within the structure of the *Science of Logic* and *Philosophy of Right*, which “Hegel did not thoroughly do.”<sup>43</sup> The relation between *Phenomenology* and *Logic* is a crucial question for Hegel’s system, as well as for the fact that his *Philosophy of Right* should be read only from the position of this relation.

But, back to Hegel’s conception of the state – once again! As Shlomo Avineri confirms, in Hegel, there can be no state that will be adequate to the one that was developed as a philosophical idea in his work.<sup>44</sup> The crucial question to be asked is: What does Hegel mean when he says that the state is something inherently rational? He does not follow the

logic according to which everything in every state is rational (for Hegel, the state as actual is always an individual, not a particular, state; for the former is a moment within an Idea, whereas the latter always belongs to history in a general sense). On the contrary, for Hegel the phenomenon of the state, the “place” where people live under the same “promise,” expresses the rationality or the rational aspect of human life. Hegel himself writes:

*It is this very relation of philosophy to actuality which is the subject of misunderstandings, and I accordingly come back to my earlier observation that, since philosophy is exploration of the rational, it is for that very reason the comprehension of the present and the actual, not the setting up of a world beyond which exists God knows where – or rather, of which we can very well say that we know where it exists, namely in the errors of a one-sided and empty ratiocination.*<sup>45</sup>

Proceeding from this, Hegel formulates his infamous formula: “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational.” This already scandalous sentence becomes even more monstrous in its English translation.<sup>46</sup> The German word for “actual” is *wirklich*, whose “specific connotation derives from its root in the verb ‘to act’ (*wirken*), which makes it clear that ‘actuality’ (*Wirklichkeit*) is not a merely passive, natural given.”<sup>47</sup> Another important point should be noted here: Hegel starts this statement by saying that what is rational is actual, and not the other way around, as it is predominantly understood. The difference is not semantic. He puts forward the actuality of the rational, which means that what is rational has, in itself, the power to actualize itself. It has the potential to turn from potential into actuality. Hegel does not put forward the primacy of rationality in actuality. This is nothing but a corollary of the former. Actuality is that in which essence and existence concur, or as he puts it in the *Science of Logic*: “Actuality is the *unity of essence and concrete existence*; in it, *shapeless* essence and *unstable* appearance – or subsistence without determination and manifoldness without permanence – have their truth.”<sup>48</sup> For this reason, actuality is rational. Hegel’s dialectical process is not a closed

process; it does not end with the reconciliation of all antagonisms. On the contrary, the properly Hegelian reconciliation “is not a peaceful state in which all tensions are sublated or mediated but a reconciliation with the irreducible excess of negativity itself.”<sup>49</sup> This is why for Hegel, reconciliation is not a situation in which antagonisms are diminished, because antagonisms and contradictions are already part of the reconciliation. One good example of this from his own work is the necessity of war. This necessity is not only the way to assert universality perpetually, against all forms of the organic organization of life, but ultimately, it speaks to the crucial argument that reconciliation itself is not possible, that an organic social state is not attainable precisely due to the force of negativity. This goes especially against the arguments of Popper and others, who saw a direct connection between Hegel’s theory of state and fascism, totalitarianism, et cetera. For Hegel, war goes beyond, or transcends the moral condemnation, as conceptualized by the common-sense wisdom of Natural Law. What moral insights don’t have a say in is how the spirit actualizes itself and takes a given form: in this enterprise, the moral insights fall into oblivion.<sup>50</sup> As he writes:

War is not to be regarded as an absolute evil and as a purely external accident, which itself therefore has some accidental cause, be it injustices, the passions of nations or the holders of power, etc., or in short, something or other which ought not to be. It is to what is by nature accidental that accidents happen, and the fate whereby they happen is thus a necessity. Here as elsewhere, the point of view from which things seem pure accidents vanishes if we look at them in the light of the concept and philosophy, because philosophy knows accident for a show and sees in it its essence, necessity. It is necessity that the finite – property and life – should be definitely established as accidental, because accidentality is the concept of the finite.<sup>51</sup>

It is interesting to analyze what Kant, the author of the perpetual peace, has to say about this. In a rather unusual manner, Kant argues:

War itself, provided it is conducted with order and a sacred respect for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, and gives nations that carry it on in such a manner a stamp of mind only the more sublime the more numerous the dangers to which they are exposed, and which they are able to meet with fortitude. On the other hand, a prolonged peace favors the predominance of a mere commercial spirit, and with it a debasing self-interest, cowardice, and weakness, and tends to degrade the character of the people.<sup>52</sup>

It is interesting to read Kant's position by assuming that he knew about the concept of trade war, with Hegel's conceptualization of the civil society and its limits, as shown by the necessity of explosion of wars.<sup>53</sup>

Let's move on to another dimension of this. In the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel writes about recognizing reason. This condensed *sentence* is worth quoting:

To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to delight in the present – this rational insight is the reconciliation with actuality which philosophy grants to those who have received the inner call to comprehend, to preserve their subjective freedom in the realm of the substantial, and at the same time to stand with their subjective freedom not in a particular and contingent situation, but in what has being in and for itself.<sup>54</sup>

The “rose in the cross of the present” is Hegel's reference to Luther, used not only to criticize the position of the beautiful soul as the operation of inactivity but to recognize the present as the only domain where freedom can be realized. This is the Christian, or more precisely, Protestant dimension of Hegel's thinking.<sup>55</sup> Luther's emblem was the cross with roses encircling it, which was conceptualized by Hegel as “Reason apprehended as the rose in the cross of the present.”<sup>56</sup> The point being that we have to participate in the brutality of the actual, as the place of actual freedom. Is this not the other definition of the state?

How can we conceptualize the state in a Hegelian orientation? If Absolute Knowing is the culmination of the dialectical process, then the

absolute of politics is the state. That is to say, politics does not begin with the state, but it always ends with the state. And this is a crucial point. For Hegel, the exact form of regulation within a state is not the object of philosophical thought. What matters is the universal *form* of the state. We can even argue that politics should aim at taking over and transforming the state. It is in this manner that we should understand Hegel's affirmation of the state form not as a moment of conformity or capitulation to the Prussian Empire but as an affirmation of politics as such. Put differently, he does not regress from the position of active Consciousness to that of the Beautiful Soul.

For Hegel, as for Žižek, the state is the answer to the problem of internationalism as well as to the problem of the commons, neither of which fits borders or other "limitations" of this kind. Hegel was aware of this, and it is for this reason that the state is "the march of God in the world." His is a state that is ultimately not representative of a nation or community. For Hegel, the state was tied to the problem of dealing with multiple nations, as was the case with Prussia, that is to say, the pre-German state. His understanding of *Volkgeist* cannot be interpreted in the spirit of a national or romantic vision. *Volkgeist* does not create the character of a people, of a nation, but is ultimately a result of its religious, cultural, and other traits. The creation of the state based on the *Volkgeist* is not that of a national state. The state is at the level of self-consciousness. The modern world, in Hegel's view, contains a multiple of political units, which are not held together by power but by Spirit. So how should we follow on from this, in revitalizing the Hegelian theory of the state from a Žižekian standpoint? The starting point should be an appropriation of Hegel's idea of *the ethical* state, a state that is founded upon a shared ethical order. Hegel writes that "the ethical order has been represented by mankind as eternal justice, as gods absolutely existent, in contrast with which the empty business of individuals is only a game of see-saw."<sup>57</sup> Or better still, the ethical order or ethical substance is "an absolute authority and power infinitely more firmly established than the being of nature."<sup>58</sup> In its Žižekian conceptualization, the state is not a representative one but is a strong body, which does not only represent the people but includes everyone

in itself. This *inclusion* is not, so to speak, an easy solution, but rather the crucial problem in every attempt to recuperate Hegel's theory of the state – a very difficult task.

When Žižek writes about the relationship between the state and politics, he says: The failure of the Communist State-Party politics is above all and primarily the failure of anti-statist politics, of the endeavor to break out of the constraints of the State, to replace statal forms of organization with “direct” nonrepresentative forms of self-organization (“councils”).<sup>[59](#)</sup>

Further, in responding to the prevailing Leftist position which affirms distance toward the state as the only political option, Žižek argues:

If you do not have an idea of what you want to replace the State with, you have no right to subtract/withdraw from the State. Instead of withdrawing into a distance from the State, the true task should be to make the State itself work in a non-statal mode.<sup>[60](#)</sup>

The crucial task remains to do this in a Hegelian manner. That is to say, how can we think of a non-national state, based on a common, shared ethical substance?

When we discuss the state in its philosophical aspect, the Idea of the state cannot be identified with any form of the modern state. The dictum quoted earlier, on the state as God's march in the world, continues as follows:

In considering the Idea of the state, we must not have any particular states or particular institutions in mind; instead, we should consider the Idea, this actual God, in its own right [*für sich*]. Any state, even if we pronounce it bad in the light of our own principles, and even if we discover this or that defect in it, invariably has the essential moments of its existence [*Existenz*] within itself (provided it is one of the more advanced states of our time). But since it is easier to discover deficiencies than to comprehend the affirmative, one may easily fall into the mistake of overlooking the inner organism of the state in favor of individual [*einzelne*] aspects. The state is not a work of art; it exists in the world, and hence in the sphere of arbitrariness, contingency, and error, and bad behavior may disfigure it in many respects.

When Hegel says that men become conscious of themselves only in the state, he thereby distinguishes between the three levels of family, civil society, and the state. The family exists at the level of feelings, with civil society as the field of self-interest. It is only within the structure of the state that there emerges a unity of subjective consciousness (intentions) and the objective order (actions). In short, this is what he means when he says:

The state is the actuality of the ethical Idea – the ethical spirit as substantial will, *manifest* and clear to itself, which thinks and knows itself and implements what it knows in so far as it knows it. It has its immediate existence [*Existenz*] in custom and its mediate existence in the *self-consciousness* of the individual [*des Einzelnen*], in the individual's knowledge and activity, just as self-consciousness, by virtue of its disposition, has its *substantial freedom* in the state as its essence, its end, and the product of its activity.<sup>[61](#)</sup>

The actuality of the state is reached only when the spheres of the public and the private are not one and the same. That is to say, contrary to civil society, where the individual can pursue his or her interests, while taking no account of others and their interests/aims, it is in the state that duty and the right merge. This puts Hegel against both liberal and



conservative positions. Of course, this in itself does not mean that Hegel is in the position of Communist politics. However, one can try to push him into it, by conceiving his idea of the state on non-national grounds, that is to say, a state that is not grounded on national *Geist*. The state as the rational whole can realize itself only if it is held together by the figure of the monarch, who is an ordinary human being, who becomes a monarch not by virtue of his abilities but by the sheer arbitrariness of his birth (biological contingency), and in this capacity guarantees the state as the ethical order of society and makes it an actuality. His or her dismissal is simultaneously the disintegration of the state. In his plea for a rehabilitation of the state, Žižek affirms the relationship between collectivity and the state, which is not bound to electoral mechanisms, but to a strong collective whose function is not representative but inclusive. The first thing to show is that Žižek is *very* clear in his remarks on the state, that “the state” is not an answer to the socioeconomic problems internal to a given nation.

At the crossing point of these two lines of argumentation lies the need to recuperate the “analytic” dimension of the Leninist Party-form – which Žižek has addressed in a series of “political thinking” texts, from *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, to his more recent *Like a Thief in Broad Daylight* – and the need to rethink the critique of the state in order to conceive of a paradoxical “non-statal State.” In short, this is the premise of the Hegelian-informed theory of the state that Žižek has been trying to revitalize. In defining Communism, he writes:

In contrast to socialism, communism refers to singular universality, to the direct link between the singular and the universal, bypassing particular determinations. When Paul says that, from a Christian standpoint, “there are no men or women, no Jews or Greeks”; he thereby claims that ethnic roots, national identities, etc., are not a category of truth. To put it in precise Kantian terms: when we reflect upon our ethnic roots, we engage in a private use of reason, constrained by contingent dogmatic presuppositions; that is, we act as “immature” individuals, not as free humans who dwell in the dimension of the universality of reason.<sup>62</sup>



One of the issues or quandaries for the contemporary Left is the question of representation versus participation. Hegel writes that “the ethical order has been represented by mankind as eternal justice, as gods absolutely existent, in contrast with which the empty business of individuals is only a game of see-saw.”<sup>63</sup>

In the struggle against global capitalism, this Hegelian way is the only way to move beyond the bourgeois state form. In taking over the state and state power and transforming it in such a way that the social and political structures do not remain solely in the hands of the Party – the state effectively *becomes the non-statal state*. Such should be our task today! Only through such a political structure can we move beyond all the obstacles and impossibilities that condemned the previous century’s attempts to establish a new form of social organization via socialism to political, economic, and ethical failure.

At the end of his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel explains:

The history of a single world-historical nation contains (a) the development of its principle from its latent embryonic stage until it blossoms into the self-conscious freedom of ethical life and presses in upon world history; and (b) the period of its decline and fall, since it is its decline and fall that signalizes the emergence in it of a higher principle as the pure negative of its own.<sup>64</sup>

How should we read this? This whole section is worth rereading. Here, Hegel discusses the stages of history, that is to say, transitions into history. For Hegel, there will always be states, and history is in fact the history of these very states. However, the puzzling aspect of this is to think the way in which (this) history relates to the history of the state form as such. Here one should remember that this form is also historically completed or overcome once it has been fully developed. In modernity, there is a specific state form, but simultaneously, there is a history of this form. One should take this into account when reading “God’s march in the world” in a profane spirit. Reading this together with the passage of the (in)famous “Owl of Minerva” can be productive. One way to read this consists in claiming that God is gone – in the same

manner as is the stable state form. A worldly divinity can die; it therefore has a history and its further determinations depend upon us.

The present time challenges us to overcome the constraints of the nation-state and to move to a universal form of political organization. I maintain that Žižek's four riders of the apocalypse will be the driving force toward a transnational form of organization. Žižek's wager is that the only way to cope with the challenges of late global capitalism is to move beyond the nation-state form. And this is where Hegel is of crucial importance. He poses a penetrating challenge to the idea of the nation, from the perspective of the state as Idea. This is the challenge before which the good old socialism of the previous century failed and ended up succumbing to nationalism. The "state" was the name Hegel had for a self-determining and objective organizational infrastructure. This makes it exceptionally challenging and hard to evacuate of a specific political reading when its logic is not so tied to praise of modern statehood. Therefore – and yet again – what does Hegel mean by the "state?"

Every form of the modern state has very little, if anything at all, in common with the forms of political and social organization that Hegel calls the "state." This non-identification, or negative determination, of the idea of the state with individual states challenges the conservative understanding of the state. This position renders an understanding of Hegel's idea of the state rather difficult, as it does not side with any particular form of statehood, be it historical or actual. In Hegel's "political philosophy," there is little or no room for a positive determination of the "idea of the state," whose movement is both the material and historical existence of God, that is to say, God's march in the world. Thus, the following hypothesis can be put forward: what Hegel calls the "state" is the condition of historical existence. Wherever there is history, the organizational conditions for it can be called a state! In this historicizing manner, one can argue, for example, that if the Paris Commune made history, then from this perspective, for a Hegelian, this should mean that the Parisian proletarians had a state. Yet, in the Hegelian sense, in its capitalist forms of social organization,

the state is not a state; for here, it is reduced to governmental structure, while its core remains the commodity form plus property laws.

So how does this help us to conceptualize a state that would be neither the nation-state nor its mirroring in the previous century's socialist state? The mistake – one that is perhaps even fatal – of twentieth-century socialism and Marxist theory in general (including the work of many contemporary thinkers such as Poulantzas, Jessop, and Brock) is the reduction of the state to secondary apparatuses that are subordinate to the needs of capital for its reproduction. This position is strikingly similar to that of the neo-liberals, as both orientations appear to underplay the crucial and active role of the contemporary state and its apparatuses in economic life. Sometimes it seems that capitalism not only controls the state, but that state apparatuses are at the very center of economic and capitalist reproduction, well exceeding the “traditional” description of their role as the legal and political guarantor for capitalist reproduction. The state serves as a direct agent for economic processes in various forms. This was also the case in twentieth-century state socialism, where the state was the sole agent and regulator of economic processes, the only difference being that there was no capitalist class.

Can we decouple the state from capital, as well as from the nation? Can there be a strong non-statal state, which would not be “reducible” to the logic of both nation and capital? In speaking of this we should not embrace the loosening up of state power into its administrative aspects, but should keep in mind the idea of the state as agent of absolute power. The state is not a closed end, but an open historical situation, full of antagonisms and possibilities, and is absolute precisely in this sense (as developed in the works of Comay, Žižek, and others). The crux is thus to break the relationship between the state and capital, as well as its identification with the nation. The identification of the state with national identity is talk of identity, which as Hegel knew, contradicts itself:

Talk of identity ... contradicts itself. Identity, instead of being in itself the truth and the absolute truth, is thus rather its opposite; instead of being the unmoved simple, it surpasses itself into the dissolution of itself.<sup>65</sup>

The empowerment of the nation-state in contemporary global capitalism is extremely dangerous as it runs against the urgent need to establish a new relation to what Žižek refers to as our new “commons.” Common dangers are a serious and urgent challenge to the totality of humanity, and for this reason, they cannot be reduced either to the nation or to (contemporary) states. The commons are not enclosed within particular determinations. The commons, as Marx has written, are the collective shared substance of our being, which are enclosed by privatization. Žižek, following Marx, identifies:

- the commons of culture, the immediately socialized forms of “cognitive” capital, primarily language, our means of communication and education, but also the shared infra-structure of public transport, electricity, the postal system, and so on;
- the commons of external nature, threatened by pollution and exploitation (from oil to rain forests and the natural habitat itself); and
- the commons of internal nature (the biogenetic inheritance of humanity); with new biogenetic technology, the creation of a New Man in the literal sense of changing human nature becomes a realistic prospect.<sup>66</sup>

This process of enclosure necessitates the resuscitation of two crucial notions: Communism and the class struggle. Enclosure or privatization is the other name of proletarianization, as Marx defined it, as a deprivation of a subject from his or her substance. Communism is the name of the collective appropriation of the commons. The difficult task is to identify ourselves, as agents of the class struggle, in this new figure. The class struggle is not reduced to an ontic level, as in the struggle of existing social classes, but is the name for the social antagonisms out of which these very social classes emerge. The re-appropriation of the commons,

that is, Communism, should be the name of the ethical substance, or in Hegelian terms, the name of the shared ethical idea.

Therefore, if the “state” is the term for the “presence of organizational conditions for the objective experience of people’s self-determination,” then the question to be asked is: what is the use of this politically?

If the declaration of “the end of Communism” as an Idea was simultaneously the “end of history,” it becomes apparent that bringing about the return of Communism as an Idea also means bringing back history. In this sense, the Hegelian Idea of the state can be said to be the condition of history. What is it if not the set of conditions that allows a people, using whatever contingent means, to face their own history, objectively ingrained in their objective life? There could even be an etymological claim within this argument. “State” connotes “state,” a stable segment of time (e.g., the “state” of a system). This is why it makes perfect sense to contend/posit that the possibility of conceiving states is a precondition for history (a time that alienates itself from itself).

This also means bringing about a new theory of the state as the practice of the organization of objective conditions that we can create, then alienate ourselves from, and then also think and critique: in other words, the Communist theory of the state should contain in itself the theory of the conditions and possibilities for the creation of the historical dynamics that can affect the people, rather than being yet another theory of “central government.” The latter would be a theory of administration, which is a completely different domain.

This is why a Communist theory of the state is a theory of all the practices that can lead us to relate to the objective spirit, that is, to recognize in our objective concrete social existence some level of autonomy (God’s march in the world), which until now remains hidden beneath the national and communal borders of national territories.

## **Dialectic and Politics in Hegel**

The Hegelian monster has a name and it is the Absolute Knowing, which is understood as the position in which *spirit heals all the wounds*, that is to say, an ideal, complete, and closed society without excesses and contradictions. But is this really how Hegel thought when he wrote about the Absolute? The standard approach to the Absolute is that it reconciles all antagonisms. Hegel famously claimed: “the wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind.”<sup>67</sup> We can read this statement either as a sign of a totalizing unification (idealism) or as a sign of the very groundlessness of the dialectical movement. The movement of the Spirit leaves no scars (leaves nothing behind) because it is the healing that *produces* the wound. Spirit leaves behind not a trail of scars – it does not “stick” to what was already there – but a trail of fantasmatic wounds (losses that were never present to begin with, losses that only had any being in so far as they were lost), which, precisely because they are not events in the sense of reality (of identifiable interruptions in the continuum of time), make no “marks” in history (scars). The “wounds of the Spirit leave no scar” because Spirit does not work through ruptures in the fabric of history: it works by positing the presupposed loss (what “would have been” before the rupture or event) and not by presupposing the posited (the wound that the scar would have healed). This strange process, through which we only lose what we never had, allows us to get to the most difficult point in Hegelian thinking and hence the actual reason why it is a thought so prone to misreadings: if the proof of contingency is the lack of “marks,” then there are no marks of contingency. In this sense, teleological determinism is indistinguishable from historical contingency: if there are only retroactive events demarcated by what we lost after them (but never directly had access to before them), then there is no transcendental structure to guarantee not only that an event has taken place, but that there are events in the Hegelian system to begin with. To formulate this in dense, but nonetheless coherent terms: the proof of contingency is the very appearance of necessity, the illusion of the one – totality, the very (lack of the) mark of the multiple without totalization. The Hegelian history is the history of the impossible, later defined by Lacan as “that which does not cease to write itself,” just as the logic of the

Hegelian Spirit, which does not cease not to leave a scar behind. The traditional understanding of Marx's Hegelian roots bears on two fronts: on the one hand, the political theory of the proletariat and, the logic of Capital, on the other. The first case is usually associated with Marx's early works, and his operation of "inverting" Hegelian dialectics, whereas the second concerns his "mature" work and the operator is the famous "extraction" of the rational kernel out of its "mystic shell."<sup>68</sup>

Politically, Marx's Hegelianism would be recognizable in the way the universal and the particular are bound together in his understanding of the proletariat. Is there a necessary link between the general direction and organization of society and the existence of a particular sub-set of this same society? The Hegelian theory of the concrete universal – of something that stands for the whole *within* the whole, even more so than the abstract apprehension of its totality – was fully deployed in Hegel's work, both in his understanding of Christianity as well as in his ontology, where the relation between a concept's extension and its exception turns out to be the relation between the concept's *formal* and *concrete* existences. In his social theory, however, Hegel took a more "formalist" perspective by considering the concrete establishment of social rules by the State, the means to regulate the interaction between private volitions in civil society, to be the expression and realization of the very concept of volition, and hence to stand for the concrete universal of society as such. This view, in which historical existence was as real as the rational existence of the State, was then subverted by Marx, who – in line with the materialist turn of his time – recognized an impasse in Hegel's deployment of the articulation between civil society and State. Rather than taking the State to serve as the concrete measure for the concept of what humanity is at a given historical moment, Marx took up Feuerbach's theory of generic being to say that it is in the very concrete activity of labor that men make their essence objective. This is a process that is extrinsically and formally deviated and deformed by the State laws of property, alienating workers from the participation and realization in their historical existence.

For the young Marx, then, it was not a matter of doing away with Hegel so much as pointing out that the logic of concrete universality, if properly followed through, should not lead us to recognize the State as “march of God in the world,” but rather to recognize that there is a social class whose concrete existence stands in for the existence of society as a whole. In their debasement, the poor working class did not only speak of the true consequences of a society based on private property, but they also incarnated the very same properties that the upcoming bourgeoisie sought to champion: if one wanted to defend the rights of a man with no particular identity, no particular nation, regardless of his possessions and social standing, one would find this very “abstract man” walking down the streets, “abstracted” due to his social conditions from his identity, nation, social standing, and means of living.

Even though Marx’s theory of class would get increasingly complex throughout his investigations, the idea that one can orient social change by a compass that is guided by a particular social class – that is, that history endows situated sub-sets of society with a different power of action – has direct links with the Hegelian theory of negativity and concrete universality. These are links that Marx would never let go. To criticize his Hegelianism, or at least to probe how necessary it is to espouse it in order to uphold other parts of his theory, is to touch upon the question of class composition, political agency, and the relation between the tactical support of the working class and the strategic vision of a new society.

But Marx’s Hegelianism is also very much at stake in his mature critique of political economy, especially as it is presented in *Capital*. If his early work was based on a critique of Hegel’s idealism – prompting the need to “invert” the logical grounding, from the immaterial realm of laws to the material problem of survival and work – when it came to the logic of capitalism itself, the stakes could no longer be conceived in this way, for the logic of value, albeit not reducible to that of property, was equally removed from the material. If Marx’s early work on economy was primarily concerned with explaining alienation, the production of disparities by intervention of unjust property rules, in *Capital* the



problem is quite distinct: here the enigma, the form of value, is rather that of equivalence. How can different objects be equated in the market? And how can profit be produced while keeping to this rule of equivalence? This is where Hegel's *Science of Logic* became an important aid, because it was not a matter of showing that "below" the equal treatment of juridical subjects by laws there was the unequal treatment of economic subjects. Instead, it was the matter of showing that the generalization of a real form of equality, with no exceptions, produced, out of its own functioning, a short-circuit that allowed for asymmetrical power relations and the accumulation of value.

In Marx's mature conception, the logic of value does not lead to pauperization solely because it is constructed on top of a class of dispossessed workers – instead, in its very functioning, in its "levelling" of the field of value, capitalism creates the conditions for surplus extraction. This argument, running sometimes against our usual understanding, implies that local trades of labor force–commodity for money are not unfair – people are paid the market price for their labor, like the price of any commodity – which is something that goes against the regular theory of power that usually underlines the theories of action and the denunciation of exploitation by socialist movements. Nonetheless, by using Hegel's dialectical theory, Marx could simultaneously maintain that capitalism introduced a new sort of freedom and equality in the world and that this very process had produced its opposite effect – while not needing to espouse a two-faced social theory, with the logic of equivalence being applied at one level of economic life and a logic of power relations underlying it, as a separate domain.

This is, then, a second point of intervention: disentangling Marx from Hegel at this point could also mean disentangling the presentation of the logic of capitalist exploitation from such an "autonomous" view of pauperization, which many think downplays the role of direct power relations in the presentation of capitalist immiseration.

Finally, at the point of contact of these two uses of Hegel in Marx's work, there is a third thesis, that of the historical teleology of

Communism, which many – Althusser included – considered the most dangerous collateral effect of Marx’s reliance on Hegelian dialectics. Binding together the thesis on the proletariat (derived from the logic of concrete universality) and the thesis on the logic of capitalist exploitation (derived from the logic of speculative identity), Marx would also import into his political and historical theory the idea that capitalism produces its own gravediggers. That the conditions of capitalist exploitation not only single out a class that stands for the whole, but that this singling out is connected with its increasing centrality as the productive forces of society – so that, at some point, capitalism would have itself set the conditions for its overcoming.

This thesis touches both on the critique of political economy and on the political vision of the Left – a Left that trusts capitalist development to deliver the conditions for its abolishment will definitely behave differently from one that does not; just as a Left that has a transcendental trust in the proletariat might behave differently toward other fronts of struggle today. Hegel is not the thinker of Communism, in the sense that one can claim Marx to be. But, the question of Communism, or as Marx would say “possible communism,” in relation between Hegel and Marx presents itself as a very interesting philosophical and political question. Underlying this debate, there is another set of questions, pointing to a more subtle problem, within the same problematic: why does Marx require a philosophical substratum? What is it in revolutionary political thinking that seems to require, to convoke even, the help of abstract philosophers? After all, one could criticize Marx’s Hegelianism in the name of a “pure” political thinking, not necessarily in the name of a different philosophical orientation. Further, the idea that certain political proposals would mean something totally different were they not backed up by some philosophical perspective seems to contradict the very materialist principle that orients itself by the concrete historical conjunctures rather than by some abstract general principle.

It is not too difficult to recognize that Marx interacts with Hegel more than with any other philosopher, then we criticize this as being a contextual problem (a fruit of the prominence of Hegel in those times)

and not really bearing on Marx's central ideas, which we then show to match in a much more adequate way the central ideas of Spinoza. Marx's scientificity, his theory of voluntary servitude and power relations, his concept of necessity, etc. – all of this would betray his exterior Hegelian presentation, pointing toward a deeper commitment to the Spinozist tradition. But this is not the only way to approach Marx, though: one could have, instead, criticized the Hegelian influences, while accepting them to be authentic and crucial, and then shown that a *better* Marxism, more adequate to our times, could be provided by this alternative philosophical underpinning.

If one takes Marx's interlocution with Hegel seriously, then the question that we must answer is: What in Hegel's work was so politically useful that led Marx to refer to him? This is not a question of philosophical importance, but a political one. We can accept that Marx turned all of Hegel's theses upside down, that he dismantled Hegel's system and his theory of the State – but all of this only makes the question even more pressing: What is it that survived after all this dismemberment? Why not abandon the reference altogether? The reason why this would be problematic for Spinozists is that, by accepting it, we would already be doing a *Hegelian analysis of Marx's inheritance of Hegel*. The idea that a formal thinking can find its true basis outside of itself – that the extension of a concept is realized in the case that is its exception, its negation – is the Hegelian move *par excellence*. Of course, this proposal is something that Marx himself spells out, when he talks about the realization of philosophy by means of the proletariat. But, it is not too far stretching to say that this thesis is extrinsic to his actual political theory, and that it is part of this exterior shell that doesn't really contribute to the important kernel of his work, which only shines through when we consider it from a Spinozist lens. Still, the very idea that Marx did not know which philosophical project was presupposed in his work, and that while he thought he was "realizing philosophy" by following Hegel into the political realm, *he was in fact doing what he desired, but not what he wanted* – that is, realizing a "practical philosophy," but not the one of Hegel, but of Spinoza – is nothing but a perfect example of what Hegel's dialectical logic does. Now, what is the

position of new Hegelian Marxists today? That is, not the Marxists who merely accept the references to Hegel in Marx's work, but who worry about the role of dialectics in the interiority of Marx's work? They do not defend that Marx was "truly" and "authentically" Hegelian: in fact, the curious thing about the arguments proposed by philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek is that *they agree with the critiques put forward by the Spinozist Marxists*, as is best exemplified by Althusser's work – the rejection of teleology, the complexification of class analysis, the acceptance that political agency is not ahistorically determined – but they *disagree that Marx held these views due to Hegel*. In fact, it is where *Marx quotes Hegel that he is at his least Hegelian*. To "be Hegelian," in this line of argumentation, does not mean to agree with Hegel, but to let go of philosophy and accept the absolute separation from political and economic thinking from the abstract and extrinsic references to philosophy. Similarly to how Žižek reads Lacan – arguing that the psychoanalyst only became Hegelian when he dropped the references to Hegel, and began to think in a Hegelian way about non-Hegelian themes – we find here a defense of Hegel, which in no way means a defense of the political import of Hegel's philosophy. The very appearance of a proof of his Hegelianism – let us say, a text by Marx claiming the centrality of Hegel to his whole project – would in fact show that Marx was *not* Hegelian, as this reliance on abstract mediations is as far from the immanent self-deployment of the concept as one can get. The question of dialectics in politics is to have the next movement (be by capital itself or be by the political movements), which is within politics its own immanence. Therefore, it is a break with its own transcendental limit. It is in these terms that this problem should be reformulated. The question is not so much that of interpreting Marx, as much as it is a matter of locating the question on: from where does one stage the autonomy of Marxist politics. This is in fact a class issue, not in the sense of what one says about class, but *from where* one speaks about politics.

How are we to think, with and through Hegel, the higher social order, which is Communism? The first thing to note is that Communism is not, or at least, should not be understood in terms of a "simple" opposition

to capitalism, in terms of overcoming capitalism. It should be perceived as a completely different form of social organization. But, just like psychoanalysis, which no matter how “successful” it becomes, cannot abolish the unconscious, Communism cannot and will not abolish all forms of antagonisms. In fact, because it will be a more just society, it will give rise to a new set of antagonisms, which as such, will determine Communism, in the same way that a certain set of antagonisms define the specifics of capitalism. Communism should be understood and visioned as an endless project. The attempts to change the world will always fail, but through this failure a new form of social organization can emerge. These attempts might give birth to new visions or new tragedies.

Antagonisms and contradictions are not obstacles to overcome, as it is often considered. Marx cannot accept the irreducibility of antagonisms, but thinks of their elimination in the just Communist society. Communism is the name of emancipation, which will not be an ideal society, but will have to accept the necessity of failure. This is Hegel’s lesson.

## Notes

1. Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinov, *The Grand Design* (London: Bantam Books, 2010), p. 5.
2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus, 1998), pp. 253–254.
3. Karl Marx, *Eleven Theses on Feuerbach*.
4. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 23.
5. V.I. Lenin, *On the Significance of Militant Materialism*:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/mar/12.htm>.
6. For more on the relation as reversal from Marx to Hegel see Agon Hamza, “Imprinting Negativity: Hegel Reads Marx,” in *Reading Marx*,

Slavoj Žižek, Frank Ruda, Agon Hama (London: Polity, 2018), pp. 101–139.

7. Slavoj Žižek, *Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 79.

8. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise* (New York: University Press of New England, 1997) p. 568.

9. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003) p. 3.

10. We have opted for the vague and indeterminate sense of the term “religion” insofar as Marx himself adopts such a conceptual stance. It is our wager that even if the term clearly stands for a generalization of the particular forms of Christian religion in Marx’s time, this generalization ends up producing a singular Marxian theory of the “elementary forms of religious life.”

11. Marx, Karl, 1843, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* at:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.

12. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Dover, 2008), pp. 221–222.

13. Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *The Communist Manifesto and Other Writings* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), p. 180.

14. See chapter on *Estranged Labor* in Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts 1844* (New York: Dover, 2007), p. 75.

15. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, p. 180, § 6.

16. Ibid. § 4.

17. Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, p. 69.

18. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003).

19. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.
20. Ibid.
21. Karl Marx, *Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>.
22. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>
23. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 164–5.
24. Ibid., p. 128.
25. Ibid., p. 165.
26. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 969
27. In his famous “fragment 74,” Benjamin writes: “one can behold in capitalism a religion, that is to say, capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion.” See Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” in *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 259.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p. 6.
30. G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1977), pp. 190–1.
31. Gérard Lebrun, *La patience du concept: essai sur le discours hégélien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 39.

- [32.](#) Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012) p. 6.
- [33.](#) Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 26.
- [34.](#) Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 261–262.
- [35.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 476
- [36.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1991), p. 328.
- [37.](#) Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, p. 261.
- [38.](#) Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 275, § 257.
- [39.](#) Ibid., p. 282, § 260.
- [40.](#) Ibid., p. 279, § 258.
- [41.](#) Slavoj Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void: Sprandels: Economico-Philosophical Sprandels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 8.
- [42.](#) Ibid., p. 10.
- [43.](#) Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 328.
- [44.](#) Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 116.
- [45.](#) Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 20.
- [46.](#) Ibid.
- [47.](#) Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, p. 126.
- [48.](#) G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 465.



[49.](#) Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). 351

[50.](#) This is one of the problems with the contemporary Left with regard to wars and military interventions, when peace and stability are placed above justice and equality. They are willing to endorse repression, as they have already done and continue doing, based on some moral neutral grounds, from the safe distance. But, moral insights have no say in how the spirit actualizes itself and takes a given form.

[51.](#) Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, § 324.

[52.](#) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 93, § 28.

[53.](#) Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, § 324.

[54.](#) Ibid., p. 22.

[55.](#) Žižek is correct to portray Hegel as a philosopher of Christianity, or more concretely, of Protestantism. For Hegel, as he himself puts it, modern philosophy is Luther in the form of thought.

[56.](#) Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, p. 395.

[57.](#) Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 152.

[58.](#) Ibid.

[59.](#) Slavoj Žižek, “How to Begin from the Beginning?” in C. Douzinas and S. Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism* (London/New York: Verso, 2010), p. 219.

[60.](#) Ibid.

[61.](#) Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 275, § 257.

[62.](#) Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, p. 104.

[63.](#) Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 152

[64.](#) Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 374.

[65.](#) Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, p. 360.

[66.](#) Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, p. 91.

[67.](#) G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 407.

[68.](#) Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 103.

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